SCHUSS! U.S. Skiers Make Downhill History

Crowd Pleaser

Phil Mickelson thrills the throngs at Scottsdale—p. 56

Sports Illustrated

SUPER BOWL XXXIX

Down Pat

The New England Patriots Celebrate Their Third Championship in Four Years

BY MICHAEL SILVER

After the game-clinching interception, Rodney Harrison and Mike Vrabel are all smiles

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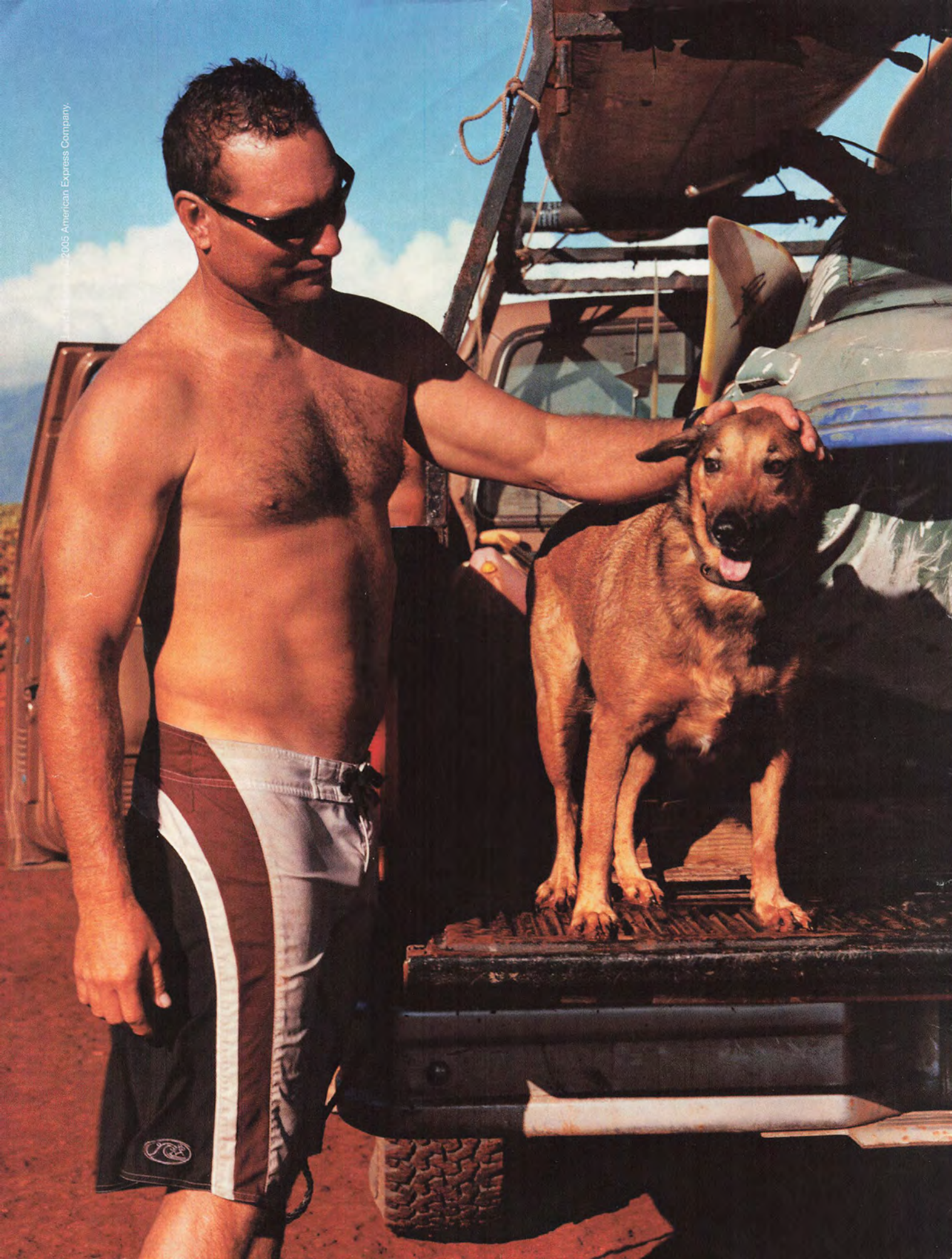
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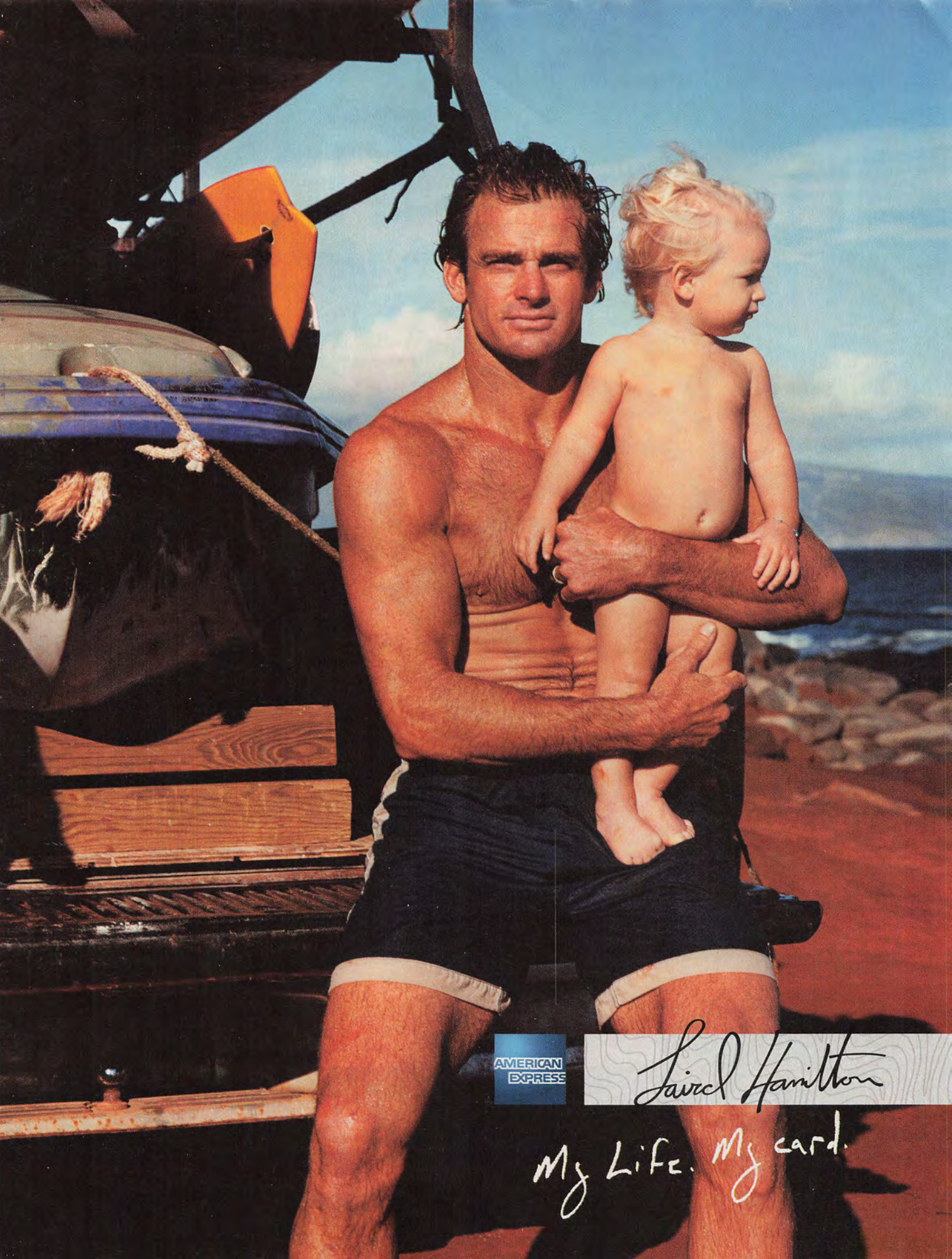
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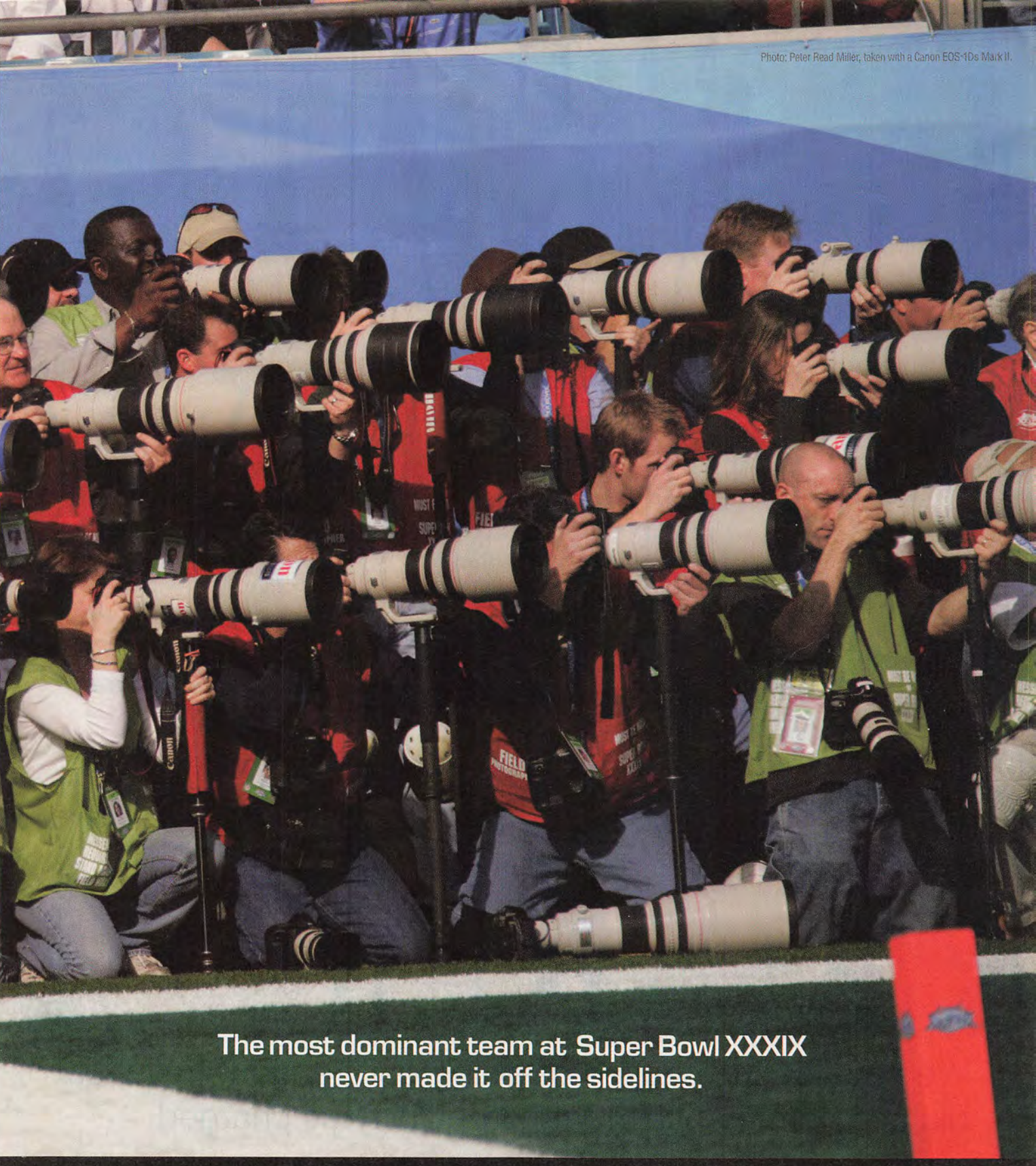
Photo: Peter Read Miller, taken with a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II.
The most dominant team at Super Bowl XXXIX
never made it off the sidelines.

sporting events. Those Canon EOS cameras and EF lenses are hard to miss.
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Sports Illustrated
FEBRUARY 14, 2005
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PHOTOGRAPH BY AL TIELEMANS

INSET PHOTO: Darren Carroll (Mickelson)

SI Extra

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SIMON BRUTY; WALTER IOOSS JR. (INSET, BRADY)

JOHN BIEVER

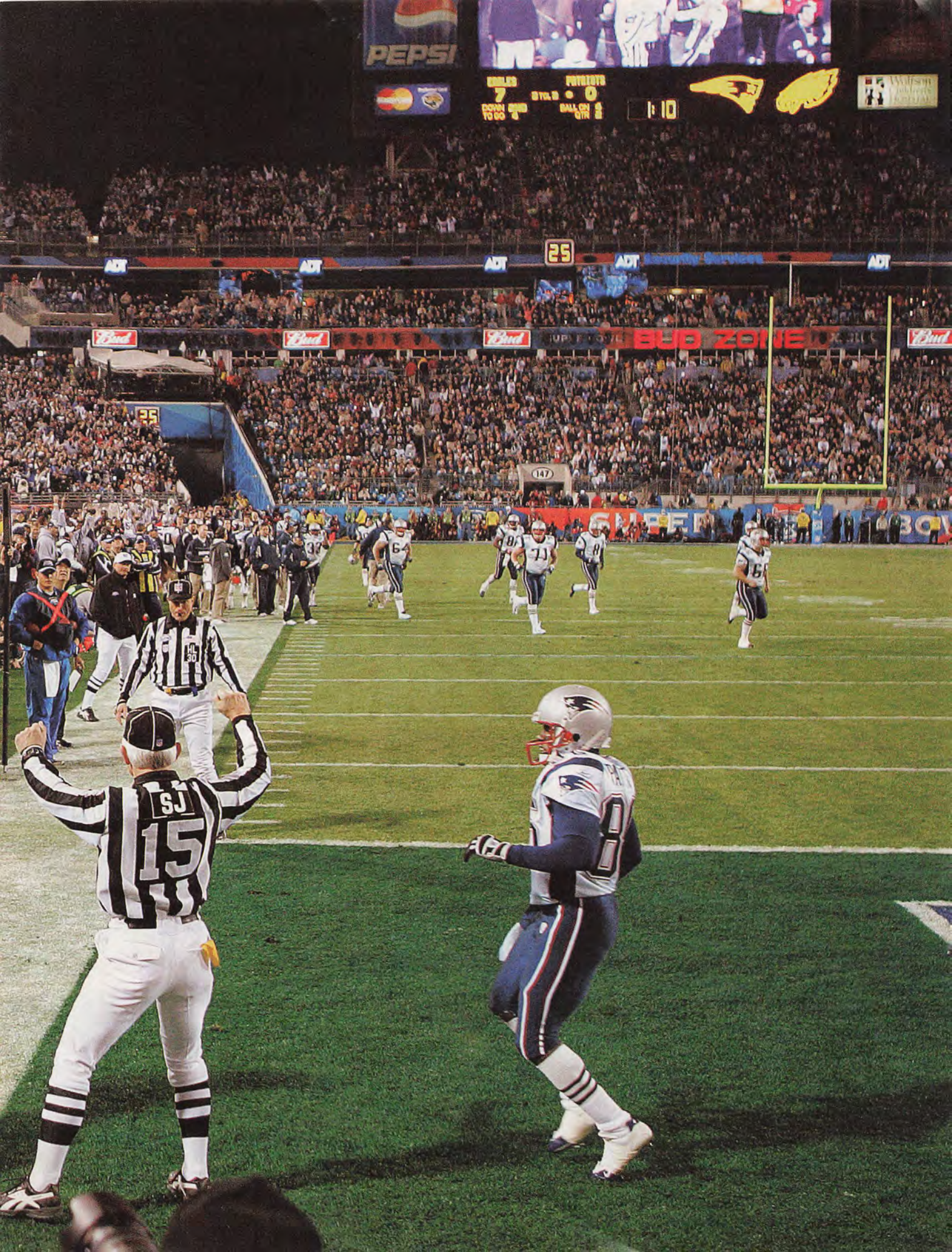
Leading Off

Givens Takes

Patriots receiver David Givens (87) celebrates after a four-yard scoring pass—the first of New England's three touchdowns against the Eagles—that tied Super Bowl XXXIX at 7–7 in the second quarter on Sunday (page 36).

Photograph by Walter Iooss Jr.

For daily Web-only Leading Off galleries, go to **SI.com/scorecard**.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Leading Off

Catch This

He's a linebacker, but the Patriots' Mike Vrabel could've passed for a sure-handed tight end as he hauled in New England's second TD pass on Sunday—then did a pretty fair impression of Eagles receiver Terrell Owens celebrating (inset).

Photograph by John Iacono

BOB ROSATO

Wilson
Patriots

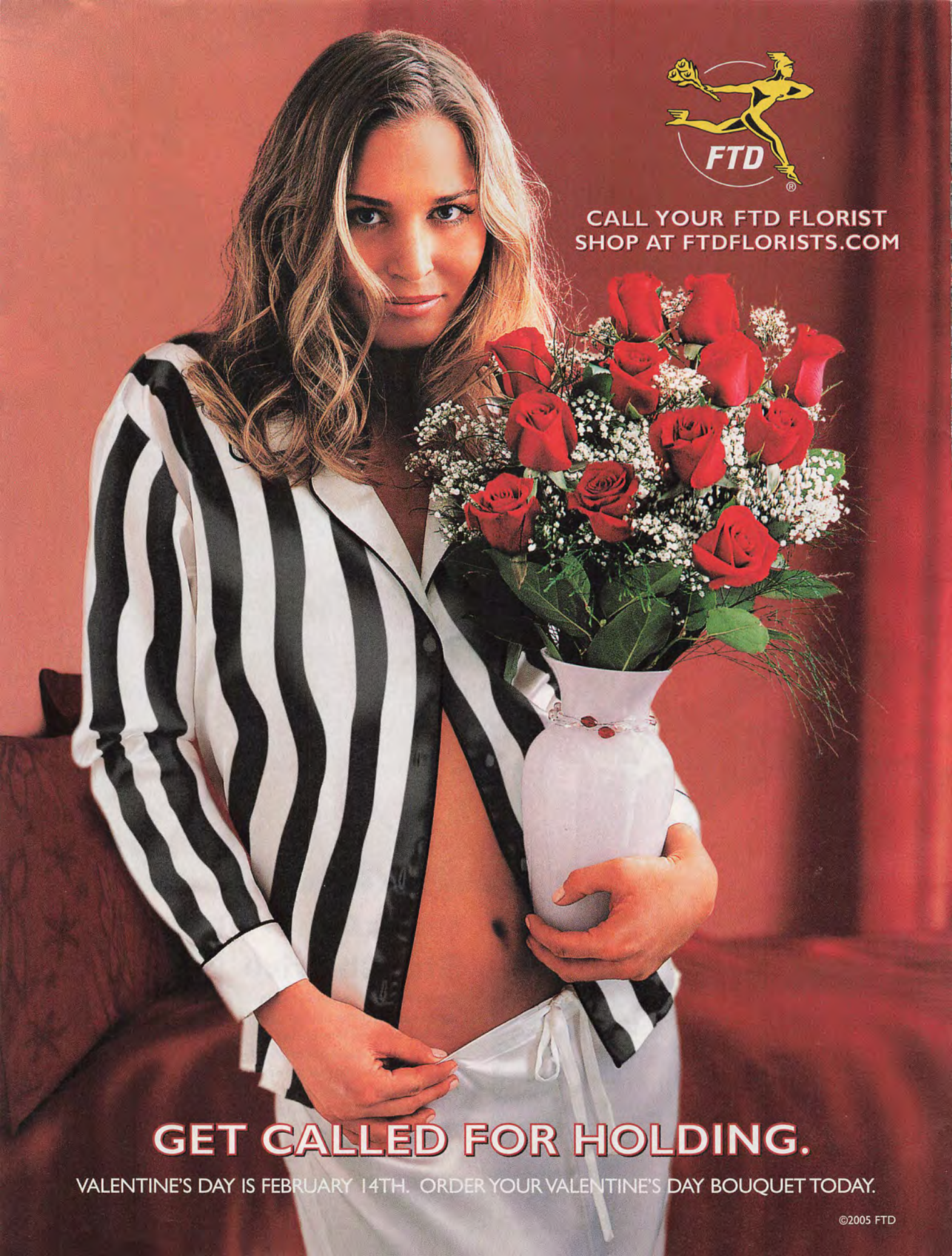
Leading Off

Stretch Drive

Running back Corey Dillon fought his way to pay dirt in the fourth quarter (left and inset) for New England's third TD; Adam Vinatieri later kicked the 22-yard field goal that proved to be the Patriots' winning margin in their 24–21 Super Bowl victory over the Eagles.

Photograph by Al Tielemans

PETER READ MILLER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Tedy Bared

Our family noted with pleasure that Tedy Bruschi was on the cover (Jan. 24) two weeks after your story *Every Team Needs a Bruschi* (Jan. 10). Tedy was no doubt too humble to mention he is also tops as a community volunteer. Several times during the past year our son, Dan, has participated in events emceed by Tedy for the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital—the rehab facility used by the Patriots. At each event Tedy spent time talking to people, posing for pictures and signing autographs. He couldn't have been nicer.

Denise and Ted Winston, Wakefield, R.I.

Fine Line

Congratulations and thank you to Bill Frakes for the photograph of the Atlanta Falcons' offensive line (*See How They Run*, Jan. 24). Every now and then we get to see a picture that shows the artistry and precision of offensive line blocking.

Jim Otto, Atlanta

Too Soon?

Karl Taro Greenfeld's article on 14-year-old basketball player Demetrius Walker (*The Fast Track*, Jan. 24) contained the lines "I shouldn't be writing this. You shouldn't be reading it." You know, you're right. So I didn't. Why didn't you make the same easy call?

Steve Laffey, St. Louis

Your story on Walker raises compelling issues regarding the speed of advancement by today's talented young athletes, but Greenfeld focuses on the potential for failure. I would like to commend D for having passion and purpose in his life. Far too often young peoples' lack of direction, goals or aspirations leads to tragedy. We all might be able to learn something from this young man's discipline and motivation in his attempt to achieve his goals.

Greg German, Spartanburg, S.C.

The photo of Walker on the train tracks should never have been taken. Your photographer trespassed on an active railroad line and brought Walker along with him. Worse yet, he had Walker stand on top of the rail, where it's very easy to slip off and break an ankle. (Stepping on the rails is strictly forbidden for railroad employees.) There should be a clear rule for SI and all of Time Warner's other outlets: no walking in the middle of a freeway and no taking pictures on railroad tracks.

Matthew Mitchell, Philadelphia

Geography Class

Jermaine O'Neal (SI PLAYERS, Jan. 24) must have been very worn out by his 1,100 mile (each way) trek to high school each day from his home in Columbia, S.C., to Eau Claire, Wis. Oh, wait: You must have meant Eau Claire High here in Columbia.

Jon Bové, Columbia, S.C.

EDITOR'S NOTE: SI regrets the error.

Point After

E.M. Swift's saying Michelle Kwan has held back figure skating in the U.S. by not performing a triple triple in competition is insane (*Flash of the Future*, Jan. 24). It's like saying Shaq is holding basketball back because he can't shoot free throws.

Lesley Kypriss, Las Vegas

Picture Imperfect

Seth Davis reports that Joe Crawford was "forced" to give Kentucky another try (INSIDE COLLEGE BASKETBALL, Jan. 24). Had Kentucky waived Crawford, it would have set the stage for other players to threaten to walk out on their commitments because they are upset with any little thing (such as playing time). The picture that ran with the item, however, is not of Crawford, but of junior walk-on Ravi Moss—who has had significant playing time, in part, because of the Crawford fiasco.

Trey Reid, Louisville

EDITOR'S NOTE: SI regrets the error.

TD To-do

Rick Reilly's *Tips for TO and Randy* (LIFE OF REILLY, Jan. 24) left out the touchdown celebration that would shock and astound everyone: shaking hands with the teammates who helped make the touchdown possible. Then again, it may be asking too much to think that a teammate deserves some credit

Rick Mancinelli, Cumberland, R.I.

When did putting up six points become less important than the celebration afterward? Professional football players are paid to get into the end zone. They need not act like children when they do.

Zach Schneider, Duluth

Our Readers Reach Out

The response to Steve Rushin's column on Tyler Kessler (AIR AND SPACE, Jan. 31)—the 14-year-old Bethlehem, Pa., boy who has battled cancer and kidney disease and whose father, Bob, has devised a restorative regimen of attending NFL games—was warm and generous. SI readers offered the Kesslers NFL tickets, temporary housing and even a kidney. All letters have been forwarded to the Kesslers. This week Tyler and Bob attended the Super Bowl and got to spend time with Dan Marino.

BUS STOP When he visited Pittsburgh, Tyler met the Steelers' Jerome Bettis.

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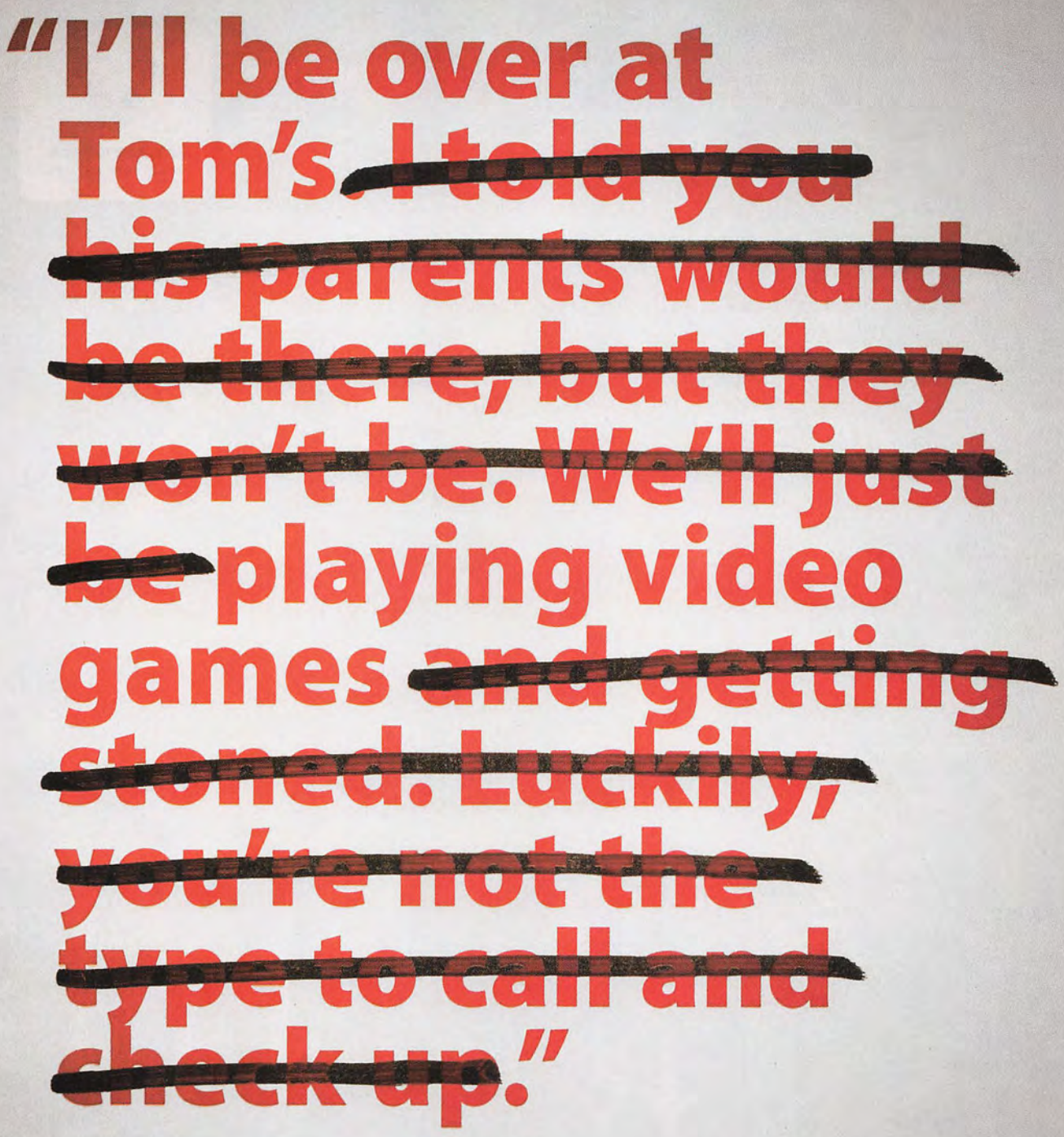
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What Big Game?

by Steve Rushin

WHAT'S REMARKABLE isn't that 800 million people watched the Super Bowl on Sunday but that 5.6 billion people did *not*. It's a tad insulting, don't you think, that our biggest sports stories are of little interest to the rest of the world? The Fighting Illini basketball team is unbeaten in Champaign, Illinois, and unheard of in Champagne, France. To those few people abroad who are even aware of it, the BALCO scandal is barely significant, a tempest in a pee cup.

So what *were* those five billion pinheads watching while America took a two-week sitz bath in Super Bowl coverage? And can we possibly learn anything from their exotic passions?

It's true, for instance, that a billion people in China don't care about Terrell Owens. While they are enamored of one NBA player—Beijing has Yao Ming out the yin-yang—they're more fascinated by Tian Liang. The Olympic diver with what has been described as a "heart-throbbing smile" won a gold medal in Athens but was just banished from the national team for being, according to the Chinese diving official who made the announcement, excessively involved in show business.

If excessive involvement in show business were a fireable offense in American sports, of course, there would be no Super Bowl, and Shaquille O'Neal would have more pink slips than Dennis Rodman's lingerie drawer.

But Tian's teammate and reputed former girlfriend, fellow Athens gold medalist Guo Jingjing, was only recently reinstated to the national diving team after also "indulging in show business for several months," as the *Shenzhen Daily* reported. The Chinese, laudably, "indulge" in show business as one might in a shameful bender. Lesson: Cashing in is crass in China. Ming Dynasty? Good. Cha-ching Dynasty? Bad.

But then all sports, like all politics, are local. In the United Kingdom the Super Bowl wasn't even the most hyped football game of the week. That was, instead, Arsenal versus Manchester United in English soccer's Premier League. The first time the teams met this season United ended Arsenal's league-record 49-game unbeaten streak, and in the tunnel after the match unidentified Arsenal players doused victorious manager Sir Alex Ferguson with pea soup *and* pizza. He looked, by all accounts, like the love child of Linda Blair and Little Caesar. In a rematch last week Man U again beat Arsenal, teaching us that revenge—unlike pea soup—is a dish best served cold.

That victory merely earned United the right to finish in second place in the league, behind Chelsea, which is often derided—in a nod to the team's billionaire Russian owner, Roman Abramovich—as Chelski. And indeed, the most impressive Roman numerals in sports last week did not belong to Super Bowl XXXIX but to Abramovich, whose club sheepishly disclosed that its payroll for last season was $216 million. By comparison, George Steinbrenner's Yankees, whose 2004 payroll of $187.9 million was a major league record, are mid-market skinflints.

And Abramovich was hardly the most impulsive European soccer owner of the week. That distinction went to the nut who owns the Greek first-division club Iraklis Salonika, which announced that it would give every fan attending its next home game a free DVD highlighting the most atrocious officiating calls that have gone against Iraklis this season. (That sound you hear is a lightbulb buzzing to life above the head of Mark Cuban.)

> For all the attention lavished on the Super Bowl, it was not even the greatest example of dead-horse-flogging in global sports last week.

For all the attention lavished on the Super Bowl, it was not even the greatest example of dead-horse-flogging in sports last week. Per capita there were more sports reporters (300) on the Japanese island of Kume (pop. 9,500) than were on hand in the press box in Jacksonville for the Super Bowl. They were chronicling the first day of spring training for the Rakuten Eagles, Japanese baseball's first expansion team in the last half century.

At least they had some games to look forward to. America's identity may be bound up in the Super Bowl but no more, surely, than Canada's is in hockey. Having lost the NHL, Canadians were last week coping with a new national trauma—the yard sale of Jean Beliveau's hockey memorabilia. The Montreal Canadiens' legend is selling his Stanley Cup rings and his 1965 Conn Smythe trophy on the same Internet auction site that is liquidating some of the Maurice Richard estate. Looking last week at the Rocket's passport and driver's license (latest bid: $825), and sympathy cards from hockey celebrities sent after his death ($200), you are reminded that voyeurism is, at root, a French word.

If sports are a universal language, it's a language of countless dialects. As a billion Indians ignored the Super Bowl, and we their cricket, sports did not sound so much like Esperanto—one global tongue—as the opposite: a Tower of Babel. □

For a collection of Steve Rushin's columns, go to si.com/writers.

SIMON BRUTY

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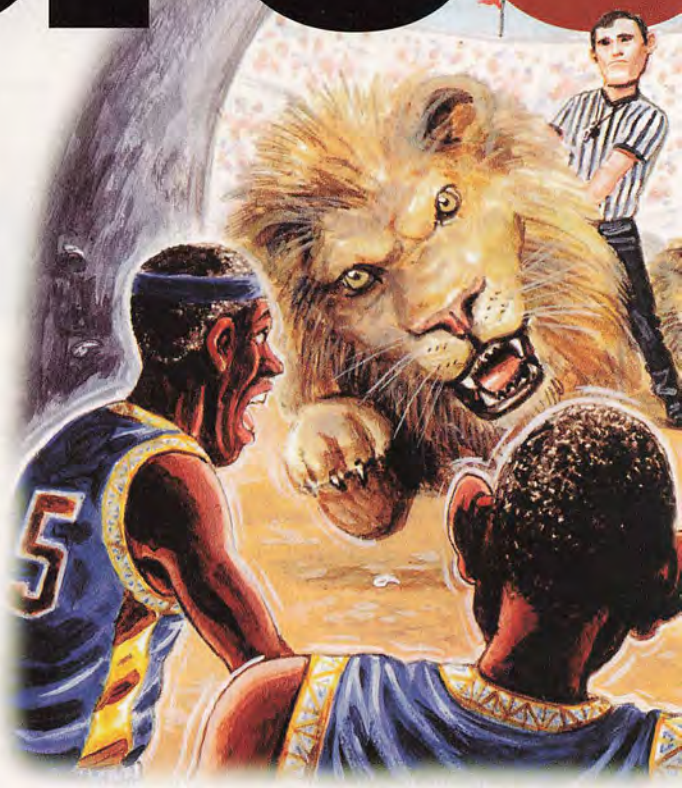


Dead Meat

Its athletic department is in shambles, and the hoops team can't buy a win. For tiny Savannah State, going big-time isn't all it was cracked up to be

by Stephen Cannella

LAST WEEK was a good one for anyone at Savannah State University who happens to love the circus. The Universoul Circus, the world's only African-American-owned big top, had its tent pitched on campus. In the parking lot of Ted Wright Stadium, acrobats and animal acts performed. And around the corner from the big top, a short walk down aptly named Skidaway Road, stood Tigers Arena, home of the Savannah State basketball team, where every visiting team is the Greatest Foe on Earth.

That's not ringmaster hyperbole: The Tigers are the Worst College Team in the Land. Their record tumbled to 0–25 on Feb. 2, when they lost a 92–68 nail-biter to Florida A&M, and with three games to go they were headed for the NCAA's second winless season in 50 years. Subtract the four wins the team forfeited last season because leading scorer Jamal Daniels—who also happened to be coach Edward Daniels's son—wasn't enrolled in classes, and the losing streak swells to 53, the longest the NCAA has ever seen. "You know Grinnell, that Division III team that was on TV?" freshman guard Chauncey Shaw said last Friday. "They'd probably beat us."

There are two types of losers. You have your lovable underdogs—think the '62 Mets or Homer Simpson—whose ineptitude has a certain inspiring charm. Prairie View A&M, the NCAA's first winless team when it went 0–28 in 1991–92, could at least find hope in the rubble. Three years earlier the Panthers had suspended their entire sports program. "It was disheartening," says Prairie View athletic director Charles McClelland, a student there at the time. "But there was a sense of enthusiasm because at least we had a team."

Then there's Savannah State, which hit bottom by overreaching and mismanaging, and where, instead of esprit, there is stonewalling. Coach Daniels declines most interview requests and won't let players talk either. Athletic director Tony O'Neal didn't return calls from SI, and last week another athletics official, eager to escape attention, told a reporter that Friday's practice would be canceled so players could attend the circus. (It wasn't.) "We focus on education and graduation," says school president Carlton Brown. "We're not going to live and die by what happens in athletics."

It was Brown, though, who, in the name of raising the school's profile—and buffing up the bottom line—decided to make Savannah State a Division I program, in 2002. The small, historically black college once had a respectable athletic tradition, winning its share of championships in the Division II Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference. In 2000 the baseball team set a Division II record with 46 consecutive wins.

But the jump to Division I plunged the athletic program into chaos. One problem is that sports at Savannah State are severely underfunded; the overall budget of $2 million is less than

Get a fresh version of Scorecard every weekday at **Si.com/scorecard.**

injected Mark McGwire with steroids. –STICKLER FOR TRUTH? PAGE 22

ard

half of what most D-I schools spend on football alone. Only eight basketball players have scholarships, though under NCAA rules the Tigers can offer 13. The football team, which is 3–29 in three Division I seasons, has only four coaches; Daniels's two basketball assistants are students. (Neither team has a strength coach.) As of Monday, with the season opener less than a week away, the softball team was still without a coach.

The whiff of scandal also hangs over the school. The NCAA is investigating allegations that an ex-assistant sold football players steroids last season. Baseball coach Jamie Rigdon, who is white, had a winning record last season, but in August he filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against Brown and other school officials. And enraged alums are questioning Brown's leadership and handling of athletic funding. "[The winless season] is not a total surprise," says Henry Nash, president of the Savannah State Athletic Foundation. "This program has been progressing toward disaster for a few years."

With boosters like that, who needs enemies? Instead of flag-waving alums and the gleaming national profile that made the Division I leap so alluring, Savannah State is left with a second-division program facing Division I bills. No wonder Tigers basketball players long ago seemed to throw in the towel. Only twice this season have they lost by single digits—their average deficit is 24 points—and they have yet to feel the thrill of leading at halftime. During a loss at Georgia Southern last month senior forward Sherrard Reddick flipped off the crowd. "Nobody wants to play anymore," says one player. Another suggests that some of the injuries that have depleted the team—only six players dressed against Florida A&M—are of the phantom variety.

"I tell recruits, This school is your last option," says Shaw. Still, on National Signing Day the football team added 16 new players. Welcome to the circus, guys.

ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF WONG; BETTMANN/CORBIS (SCHMELING); AP (SCHMELING AND LOUIS)

A Clashing Symbol

Shrugging off Hitler's embrace, Max Schmeling forged a friendship with his greatest ring rival

It is ironic that the last famous German who is associated with the Third Reich to die was not a Nazi. But Max Schmeling, powerful and handsome, who finally passed on last week just months shy of his 100th birthday, was at once "the Heil Hitler hero" who brought the greatest sports glory to the Führer and a very conflicted, very human citizen who wrestled with the devil as often as he boxed with the world's best fighters.

Schmeling is, of course, best known for his two fights with Joe Louis. In 1936, when the German was already 30 and supposed to be a washed-up pug, he handed the Brown Bomber his first defeat. Then, in 1938, Louis brutally reduced Schmeling to a gory pulp in less than two minutes. The fights themselves, though, were on the undercard to ideology, as Schmeling and Louis were generally portrayed as stand-ins for fascism and democracy.

Schmeling actually came to fame before Hitler took power in 1933. A mere laborer who built up his mind as well as his body, Schmeling not only became heavyweight champion but also part of the racy Berlin avant-garde set. He married a beautiful movie star, Anny Ondra. Candidly, Schmeling would later admit to having turned his head to the obvious horrors around him. He met Hitler on several occasions, but at the same time he tried to keep some distance from the Führer. Schmeling refused to accept Hitler's Nazi Dagger of Honor; he would not fire his Jewish-American manager, Joe Jacobs, and at the very risk of his life he hid two Jewish boys in his apartment on Kristallnacht, the brutal Nazi pogrom of 1938. This was after Louis had annihilated him and Schmeling was no longer a useful figure to the Nazis. They paid him back for his renegade ways by drafting him into the army when he was 34.

TO THE MAX With war on the horizon Louis evened the score by KO'ing Schmeling in 1938.

Schmeling was wounded in 1941 while parachuting into Crete, but he survived to become an extremely wealthy businessman—largely thanks to his holdings in that most American company: Coca-Cola. He became friends with his old foe, Louis, and often gave the indigent old champ money. No athlete ever so faced the ambiguities and dissonance of life as did Max Schmeling. *—Frank Deford*

Upwardly Mobile

The NFL's leading rusher steps aside—and contemplates life in the owner's box

IN THE END the crushing weight of common sense forced Emmitt Smith to retire, even though the last thing he wanted to do was stop. He turns 36 in May; a 36-year-old running back is like a 42-year-old starting pitcher: rare. He'd averaged 48 yards a game in his final two forgettable seasons in Arizona. He hasn't averaged four yards per carry since 2000. The woebegone Cardinals weren't going to re-sign him, and with the pool of running back talent available this off-season thanks to free agency (Shaun Alexander, Rudi Johnson, Edgerrin James), trades (Reuben Droughns, Travis Henry) and the draft (Cedric Benson and Cadillac Williams), what G.M. would want the stat-hungry Smith at the expense of a runner on the rise?

"My mind is made up. I think it is only fitting for me to leave the game of football and move on with my life," Smith said in a tearful announcement at the Super Bowl. You got the feeling that the tears came from being forced from the game he loved as much as anything else.

Smith retires with a 1,629-yard lead on Walter Payton on the all-time rushing list, a 4,989-yard advantage over Curtis Martin—who now becomes the leading active NFL rusher—and a legacy of hard work, playing in pain, and class. "I think of greatness, grace and passion when I think of Emmitt Smith," commissioner Paul Tagliabue said last week. History, at least my version of it, will place Jim Brown, Walter Payton, Barry Sanders and O.J. Simpson ahead of Smith, but Smith can take pride in being probably the essential piece of Dallas's three-time Super Bowl–winning team in the '90s. Without him, Jimmy Johnson's boat in the Florida Keys wouldn't be called *Three Rings*.

STAR TREK Smith, who played on through pain, broke down last week when he retired.

After the regular season Smith called Tagliabue to talk about ownership opportunities. That, according to one ex-Cowboy teammate, is what Smith would like to do now. But Smith hasn't had discussions with either of the two groups trying to buy the Vikings from Red McCombs for $600 million. There has never been a black primary owner in the NFL, though several teams have black owners with minority shares. If, for example, Timberwolves owner Glenn Taylor can persuade McCombs to sell the Vikings to him, he would be wise to enlist Smith (say, with a 10% stake in the approximately $550 million sale price) as an active front man for the team. Just maybe Smith would be able to talk some sense into Randy Moss.

—Peter King

Go Figure

$170 million Amount, in Canadian dollars, by which Canada's GDP will decrease if the NHL season is canceled, according to a government estimate.

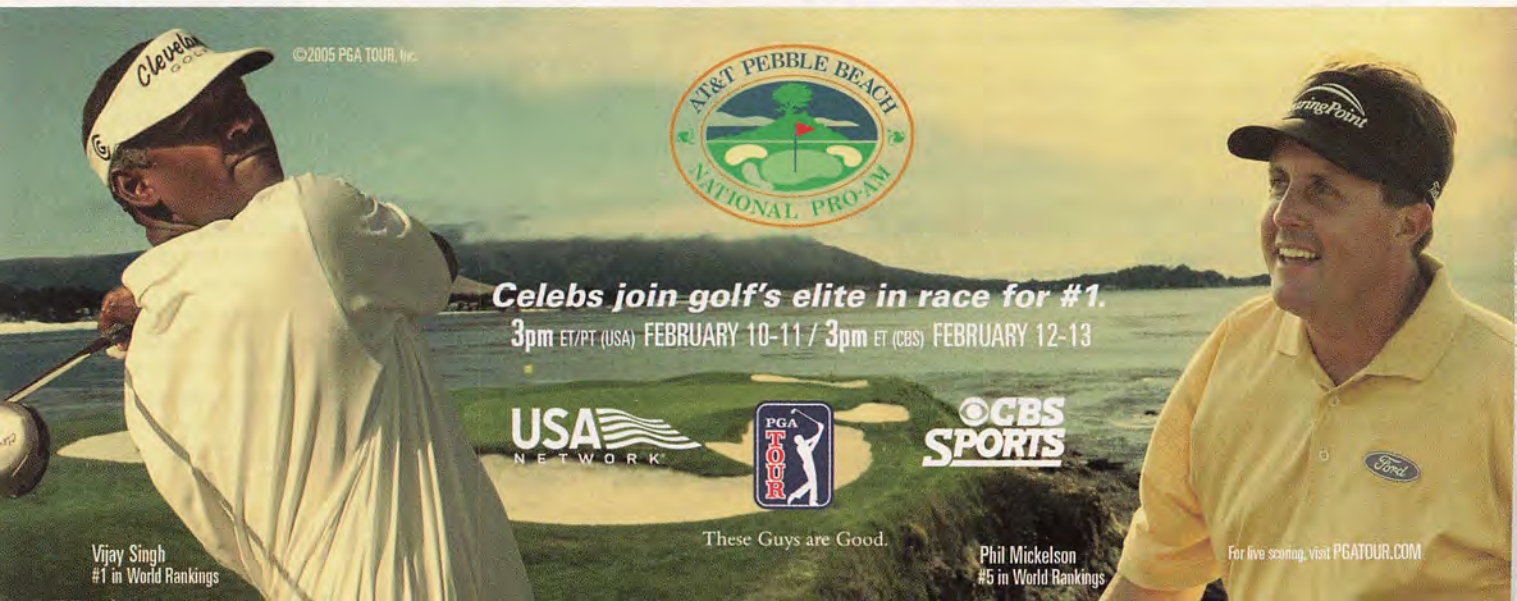
8,769 Miles the Spurs will travel on their current 19-day, seven-city trip, made necessary because a rodeo has taken over the SBC Center in San Antonio.

71½ Days it took British sailor Ellen MacArthur to circumnavigate the globe, a world record for a solo around-the-world trip.

$0 Amount of state income tax new Marlin Carlos Delgado will pay if he's traded from Florida, which doesn't tax income, to a state that does; a clause in his contract would require his next team to foot his tax bill.

33,199 Attendance at Syracuse's win over Notre Dame at the Carrier Dome last Saturday, an NCAA on-campus basketball record.

IRWIN THOMPSON/DALLAS MORNING NEWS (SMITH CELEBRATING); AMY SANCETTA/AP (INSET)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WHEN IN MIAMI...

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For the Record

Sentenced To three years of probation and community service, Atlanta Thrashers center Dany Heatley, 24, who pleaded guilty to four misdemeanors, including second-degree vehicular homicide and speeding, in Fulton County (Ga.) Superior Court. On Sept. 29, 2003, Heatley lost control of his Ferrari on the way home from a Thrashers function with teammate Dan Snyder and crashed into an iron fence. Snyder was killed, and Heatley, the NHL rookie of the year in 2000–01, suffered a broken jaw and torn knee ligaments. Prosecutors originally charged Heatley with first-degree vehicular homicide, but they reduced the charges after the Snyder family urged them not to send Heatley to jail. The Snyders said Heatley had shown remorse, and he again took responsibility for the crash when he spoke in court. "The mistake I made that night was driving too fast," he said. "This mistake will stay with me the rest of my life."

Dismissed From the Iowa basketball team, leading scorer Pierre Pierce, who is being investigated by West Des Moines police for his role in an incident on the night of Jan. 27 at the home of a woman he says is his girlfriend. (She told police she isn't.) The junior guard, 21, said he and the woman had "an argument," but authorities said last week they were looking into crimes including intent to commit sexual abuse and burglary. No charges were filed as of Monday, but Hawkeyes coach Steve Alford booted Pierce on Feb. 2 for "betray[ing] the trust we placed in him when he was given a second chance." In 2002 Pierce was charged with third-degree sexual abuse and he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor assault charge.

Discovered By scientists at the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), a designer steroid they believe is the next generation of THG, the steroid at the center of the BALCO scandal. The new steroid, christened desoxy-methyl testosterone (DMT), was in a vial labeled NEW STUFF confiscated by the Canada Border Services Agency in December 2003 when agents arrested Canadian sprinter Derek Dueck on charges of making false and deceptive statements. Last week the retired Dueck pleaded guilty to attempting to import the illegal drug from the U.S. and must pay a fine of $3,000 Canadian. WADA said last week it did not believe the drug had circulated among athletes.

Fixed By a wide-ranging group of players and referees, several German professional soccer games in 2004, according to German prosecutors. Last month referee Robert Hoyzer told authorities he had accepted $65,000 from a Croatian gambling ring to fix games. Last week the scandal widened when it was revealed that three other officials and 14 players were suspected of throwing at least 10 games.

Crowned As the men's overall speed skating gold medalist at the World All-Around Championships in Moscow, Shani Davis, 22, the first African-American to win the sport's most prestigious annual event. Davis also won gold in the 1,500-meter race, leading an unprecedented U.S. sweep of the event's first four places.

Died Vikki LaMotta, the ex-wife of former middleweight champ Jake LaMotta, of complications from heart surgery, at age 75. The LaMottas married in 1946, when Vikki was 16 and Jake was 25, and they divorced 11 years later. Their stormy relationship was immortalized in *Raging Bull*—Cathy Moriarty portrayed Vikki—and the 1980 film sparked renewed interest in the woman known to boxing fans as the Bronx Beauty. A year after the film's release the 51-year-old Vikki posed nude in *Playboy*.

Stickler for Truth?

In a new book Jose Canseco says he injected teammates with steroids

JOSE CANSECO has long planned to make a literary splash. "As a rookie he said he was going to write an exposé on things going on in the clubhouse," says Dave Stewart, a former A's teammate. "I don't think anyone took him seriously."

Now Canseco has made good on his word. According to the New York *Daily News*, Canseco says in *Juiced: Wild Times, Rampant 'Roids, Smash Hits, and How Baseball Got Big*, that he injected Mark McGwire with steroids in the bathroom of the A's clubhouse when they played together in the late 1980s and early '90s. The *News* reported that the book, due on Feb. 14, also says McGwire introduced ex-Athletic Jason Giambi to steroids and that Canseco, who admitted in 2002 that he used steroids, injected Rafael Palmeiro, Juan Gonzalez and Ivan Rodriguez while they were all Rangers in the mid-'90s.

BASH BROTHER Canseco (right) says McGwire and Rodriguez (inset) cheated.

Palmeiro denied the charge, saying, "At no point in my career have I ever used steroids." Other players also questioned Canseco's credibility. "Canseco was jealous of McGwire," says Ron Hassey, an Oakland catcher from '88 to '90. Adds Stewart, "I think most people [in baseball] would say he's not credible." —*Albert Chen*

GRIGORYDUKOR/REUTERS (DAVIS); ALBERT DICKSON/ICON SMI (MCGWIRE AND CANSECO); PAUL SANCYA/AP (RODRIGUEZ); T. LEVETTE BAGWELL/ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION (HEATLEY)

The Show

By Bill Scheft

GOOD TO BE HERE. What a long day, Sunday: My new TV went through six units of plasma.

Pats' new theme: Live and Let Dynasty The Patriots have been quietly confident for a while. After the game Tom Brady guest-starred on *The Simpsons*, and his animated character was already wearing three rings.

The Eagles did not go away empty-handed. For finishing second they get to take home the Stanley Cup.

Bill Belichick's day got off to a strange start when he went to the wrong bench after coming out of the tunnel. But to be fair, he thought he saw a Goodwill bin and wanted to get another sweatshirt.

Terrell Owens had a phenomenal game despite having pins in his right ankle. To help his recovery, Owens slept in a hyperbaric chamber he had shipped down. Actually, he didn't want to sleep in the hyperbaric chamber, but he couldn't get a hotel room.

The NFL indecency police went a bit overboard. Who got Flea to change the name of his group to the Red Zone Chili Peppers?

And the halftime show was a little too tame. Were you like me? Were you hoping Paul McCartney would cut loose and sing *All My Heterosexual Loving*?

This year's commercials were weird. I'm not sure whose ad that Aussie Rules football spot was, but Gladys Knight had more yards after the catch than Freddie Mitchell.

By the way, those ads for careerbuilder.com with all the monkeys running around the office? That was a reenactment of the Vikings' war room on draft day.

And Ford pulled an ad featuring a clergyman being tempted by a new pickup truck. Good move. These days, you don't want clergy and *pickup* in the same scene.

Coach K faints during game The last thing the Duke coach recalls was someone saying, "Phone call from Mitch Kupchak. . . ."

Rudy Tomjanovich told Kupchak, his boss in L.A., that he was resigning as the Lakers' coach. Tomjanovich cited health issues. Apparently, during his last checkup his doctor found toxic levels of Kobe.

At his final press conference Tomjanovich appeared with a bottle of Diet Coke. Pepsi is a Lakers sponsor, so team officials got another bottle with no label. Whew. For a minute there I thought they didn't have their priorities straight.

Tomjanovich will remain with the Lakers as a consultant. Which means he'll scout the personal ads for Jeanie Buss.

President Bush hosted the Pistons at the White House. In a related story Bernard Kerik was turned down for the job as head of home court security at Auburn Hills.

Bonds gets knee scoped Doctors repaired a tear in his meniscus and also removed the miniature transmitter installed by Victor Conte.

Barry is in for a long rehab. Right now he can only bend the truth 20%.

Nothing on ice Never realized how much I missed hockey until I found myself watching Arena football just to stare at the dashers.

There was some optimism late last week. The CCM factory had begun producing a hard cap with a clear visor.

Yogi Berra's suing TBS over use of his name in salacious ad for *Sex in the City* Yogi almost filed a second defamation suit, until four people convinced him that Manolo Blahnik wasn't some kid he managed in winter ball.

Max Schmeling passes away at 99 Sad. Now they have to find another opponent for Riddick Bowe's comeback.

My time is up. You've been great. Enjoy Duke and the Drivers.

Bill Scheft is opening a designated driving range next to the 16th hole at the FBR Open.

Q+A

Bill Self

The 42-year-old Oklahoma native is the coach of the No. 3–ranked Kansas Jayhawks

SI: You coached at Illinois before taking the Kansas job in 2003. Are the Illini the best team you've seen this year?

Self: Illinois has been the best team in the country. It's met every challenge. But I'm biased because I know those guys so well.

SI: Will we ever see another undefeated champion in college basketball?

Self: I don't want to say it can't be done, because there are a couple of teams this year that made it past the halfway point. But records are inflated because of nonconference scheduling. I personally can't see it happening.

SI: You worked under Larry Brown at Kansas as a graduate assistant in 1985. How much did you make?

Self: I made four grand. I had major responsibilities. I read *USA Today* every day to let Coach Brown know if there was anything worth reading.

SI: At Oral Roberts you were 6–21 in 1993–94, your first year as a head coach. Did you ever think that coaching wasn't for you?

Self: I went into it thinking it was going to be pretty easy. And I realized that first year that coaching is overrated. It's about getting players. Ever since then my motto has been, We have to recruit.

SI: If you could recruit any player in history, who would it be?

Self: Wilt [Chamberlain]. How cool would it be to coach a guy that changed the rules? Michael [Jordan] is the best player, but Wilt was the most dominant.

SI: You favor Journey, Styx and Bruce Springsteen on the radio when you're driving. Do players ever get on you for that old-school stuff?

Self: No, because I don't let them ride with me.

—Richard Deitsch

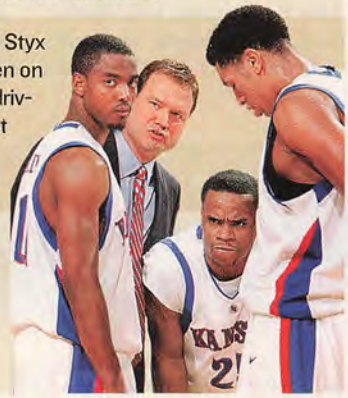


ILLUSTRATION BY DREW FRIEDMAN; ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (SELF); ORLIN WAGNER/AP (HUDDLE)

The Beat

By Lisa Altobelli

THREE DAYS after Academy Awards ballots were mailed out, **Hilary Swank** scored a knockout in the first head-to-head showdown between the two favorites for best actress. Last Saturday, Swank, who plays a boxer in Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (SI, Jan. 31), received the best-actress award from the Screen Actors Guild over *Being Julia* star **Annette Bening**. It's not the first time Swank and Bening have duked it out in Hollywood's awards season. Five years ago Bening was the Oscar favorite for her work in *American Beauty*, but Swank pulled out an upset win for *Boys Don't Cry*. This time around the SAG score makes Swank the Oscar front-runner—13 of the last 20 leading-actor SAG winners have gotten love from the Academy as well.

■ **Lance Armstrong** debuted his weekly show, *Live Strong Radio*, on Jan. 30 on Sirius satellite radio—and no, he didn't just play **Sheryl Crow** songs. Broadcasting from his Austin home, the six-time Tour de France champ talked about his training and spun **Grant Lee Buffalo**'s *Lone Star Song* and the **John Butler Trio**'s *What You Want*. Armstrong joins an impressive stable of jocks on Sirius. Skater **Tony Hawk**, surfer **Kelly Slater**, skier **Johnny Moseley** and beach volleyball star **Kerri Walsh** all host weekly shows.

PICTURE THIS If Twiggy the Water-Skiing Squirrel is so caution-conscious—she and owner Lou Ann Best tour the country promoting water safety—then where's her helmet? Twiggy performs about 20 shows a year with Best, who has been training squirrels for 25 years. "Twiggy is really quite happy with her life," she has said. "She has her own room at home . . . and the run of my motor home while we're on the road."

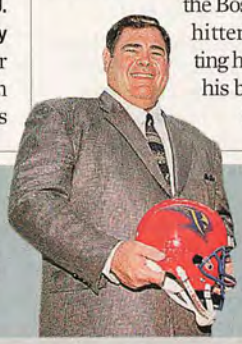
■ Tension mounts when Yankees and Red Sox fans face off with only bragging rights at stake, so sitting them at a poker table might make for compelling TV. Boston chairman **Tom Werner**, producer of *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne*, is launching a reality series with the catchy title *Partypoker.net Boston vs. New York Poker Challenge*. On the show, which premieres in March on both the Red Sox' and Yankees' cable networks, six supporters of each team will play a winner-take-all Texas Hold 'Em tournament. Open calls were held last month to find noncelebrities who possess what casting director **Angela Peri** calls the three P's—poker ability, passion and personality—as well as the $5,000 entry fee. The last player standing walks away with the cash and 10 luxury-suite tickets at Fenway Park or Yankee Stadium.

THIS WEEK'S SIGN OF THE **APOCALYPSE**

Goodyear paid Pistons guard Richard Hamilton to braid his hair in the tread pattern of one of its tires.

■ The Eagles and the Patriots weren't the only ones in Jacksonville with jumpy stomachs before the Super Bowl. On Saturday, Dolphins quarterback **A.J. Feeley** and NFL free agent **Danny Farmer**—along with soccer star **Heather Mitts**—took a spin on Zero Gravity Corporation's *G-Force One*, a modified cargo plane that simulates weightlessness by climbing to 34,000 feet and then dropping back toward Earth. They're the first pro athletes to try the stunt; Feeley and Farmer tossed a football back and forth as they floated out of their seats. "I have a horrible fear of flying," Feeley said. "What bigger thrill than to face it head-on?"

■ Rest easy, Red Sox fans: **Johnny Damon** will still be sporting the Samson look when the season opens. Damon's new book, *Idiot: Or How I Learned to Stop Thinking and Beat "The Curse"*, hits shelves on April 4, and a clause in his publishing contract forbids the Boston leadoff hitter from cutting his hair until his book tour is finished.



They Said It

DAVID BAKER 6′ 9″, 400-pound Arena Football League commissioner, on what he hears when he steps on his audio scale: "Come back when you're not in your car."

JAMES GIBBARD-TULSA WORLD/AP (PICTURE THIS); KEVIN WINTER/AP (BAKER); VINCE BUCCI/GETTY IMAGES (SWANK)

The Week Ahead

What to watch and watch for **By Amanda Cherrin**

FRIDAY 11

High School Basketball, No. 8 Oak Hill Academy at No. 23 St. Patrick's (N.J.) ESPN2 7:30 p.m. | The Virginia powerhouse that has churned out 19 NBAers is led by three of the top 100 seniors in the U.S.: Eric Devendorf, K.C. Rivers and Jamont Gordon.

SATURDAY 12

Pro Bowl Skills Challenge ESPN 6 p.m. | Peyton Manning, Michael Vick and others compete and show off their skills. **Tyson Invitational ESPN2 9 p.m.** | Veronica Campbell and Allyson Felix, the one-two finishers in the Olympic 200 meters, meet in the 60.

SUNDAY 13

PGA Tour AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am, Final Round CBS 3 p.m. | Competition wraps at the scenic oceanfront course. **Spurs at Heat ABC 1 p.m.** | A possible NBA Finals preview? The top teams from the East and West meet in Miami.

MONDAY 14

No. 15 Pittsburgh at No. 8 Syracuse ESPN 7 p.m. | The Orange try to avenge Pitt's upset win last month. ***Fearless: Picabo Street* OLN 9 p.m.** | Street suffered a horrific knee injury after winning Olympic gold in '98, but she came back for the 2002 Games.

TUESDAY 15

Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show USA 8 p.m. | The 129th competition brings 2,500 pooches to Madison Square Garden. Best-in-show favorites include Tommy, a keeshond from Boulder, Colo., who can sense when owner Karen Evasuik has a migraine coming on.

WEDNESDAY 16

Nordic World Ski Championships | 500 jumpers and cross-country skiers compete in Oberstdorf, Germany. **Winter Revolution OLN 9 p.m.** | Ex-Colorado wideout Jeremy Bloom, who chose snow over football, skis at the World Cup freestyle event in Lake Placid.

THURSDAY 17

Women's Basketball, No. 16 Minnesota at No. 3 Ohio State 8 p.m. | Ohio State is the nation's top shooting team (51.8%); the Gophers (47.5%) rank eighth. ***NASCAR: Animal Crew* Animal Planet 8 p.m.** | NASCAR drivers and the puppies they love.

Under Review

Fox delivered a Super Bowl broadcast memorable more for what it didn't have (bare breasts and controversy) than what it did (solid commentary by smooth professionals). Joe Buck, Cris Collinsworth and Troy Aikman, calling their first Super Bowl for the network, offered strong opinions, especially when it came to the Eagles' clock mismanagement in the fourth quarter. "How many Philadelphia fans are screaming at the TV, saying 'Hurry up'?" asked Buck, who later added that the Eagles looked worn out. "There's no excuse for being worn out," said Aikman, the MVP of Super Bowl XXVII. The much-hyped Turf Cam had as much impact as forgotten Eagles receiver Freddie Mitchell. The only semimemorable shot from the dozen cameras embedded around Alltell Stadium was a third-quarter view from beneath Patriots long snapper Lonie Paxton. Eight hours of pregame programming featured an overabundance of *American Idol* judge Randy Jackson, but one moment did work: Former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton giving predictions. Bush Sr. picked the Pats. Clinton said the point spread was too big and the game would depend on the Eagles' defense, but declined to offer a winner. "It's hard for me because both those towns voted for me twice," he said. —R.D.

COURTESY OF OAK HILL ACADEMY (OAK HILL LOGO); SCOTT CLARKE/PGA TOURIMAGES.COM (SINGH); SANDRA DUKES (DOG SHOW); JAY LAPRETE/ICON SMI (OHIO STATE); DOUGLAS C. PIZAC/AP (LODWICK); SIMON BRUTY (STREET); TOM DIPACE (YOUNG)

"DAMN GOOD"

The Washington Post

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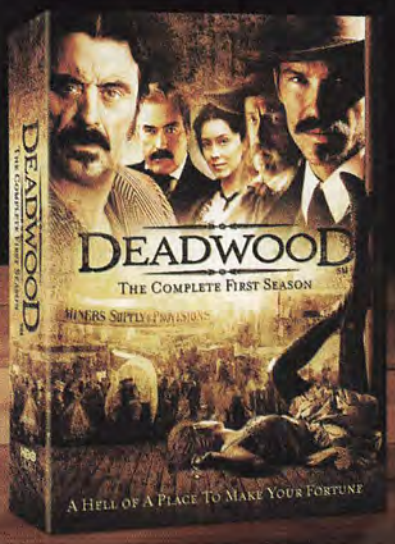

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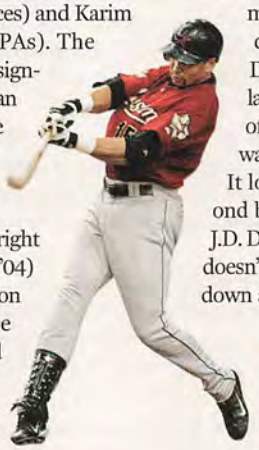
Jacob Luft: New-Look Lineups

THE WINTER wheeling and dealing is pretty much done, and many teams barely resemble what they looked like when the 2004 season ended. In some cases that's a good thing. Let's take a look at five of the more intriguing new-look lineups.

1. New York Mets

2004: 684 runs, 12th in NL
2005 Outlook: Last year the Mets gave too many at bats to guys like Todd Zeile (.319 OBP in 396 plate appearances) and Karim Garcia (.272 OBP in 202 PAs). The key off-season moves were signing centerfielder Carlos Beltran *(right)* and switching Mike Piazza back to catcher to take Jason Phillips's bat out of the lineup. Also, impressive youngster David Wright (.525 slugging percentage in '04) will put in his first full season at third base and in the cleanup spot. First base could be an interesting platoon of lefty Doug Mientkiewicz and righty Andres Galarraga, who has killed lefties in the past. This offense is for real.



2. Seattle Mariners

2004: 698 runs, 14th in AL
2005 Outlook: So many shortstops were available this winter, and the best the Mariners could do was Pokey Reese? At least they identified the weakest areas, signing free agents Adrian Beltre and Richie Sexson for corner infield positions. Bucky Jacobsen (nine HRs in 160 at bats last year) will get time at first and DH when he returns from knee surgery late in spring training. Expect Seattle to climb back toward respectability.

3. Milwaukee Brewers

2004: 634 runs, 15th in NL
2005 Outlook: The Brewers stand to improve most at catcher, where Chad Moeller was abysmal. (New backstop Damian Miller had a .339 OBP and a .403 slugging percentage for Oakland, numbers that dwarfed Moeller's production.) Replacing centerfielder Scott Podsednik with Carlos Lee was an unsung off-season move. Milwaukee could make a giant leap.

4. Los Angeles Dodgers

2004: 761 runs, 9th in NL
2005 Outlook: Going by Value over Replacement Player (VORP), a stat that measures a player's value by runs contributed to the team, the 2005 Dodgers' lineup is 43 runs behind last year's. But it's hard to make much of '04's numbers because the team was overhauled at the trade deadline. It looks like L.A., which added second baseman Jeff Kent and outfielder J.D. Drew, will have a decent lineup. If it doesn't, G.M. Paul DePodesta will tear it down at the trade deadline again.

5. Arizona Diamondbacks

2004: 615 runs, 16th in NL
2005 Outlook: You know you're in trouble when picking up shortstop Royce Clayton represents an offensive upgrade. Arizona needs huge bounce-back years from Troy Glaus and Luis Gonzalez to get out of the offensive cellar. Also, they are better off sticking with Scott Hairston at second instead of the newly added Craig Counsell, but it looks as if they will make the change anyway. On paper this lineup doesn't appear much better than last year's flop.

▶ You can read Jacob Luft's Inside Baseball column and his Power Rankings at SI.com/baseball.

The Poll Position

Whom should SI name as its NFL Player of the Year?

○ Tom Brady ○ Daunte Culpepper ○ Peyton Manning
○ Curtis Martin ○ Donovan McNabb ○ Terrell Owens

Vote at **SI.com/poy**. *SI will name its NFL Player of the Year next week.*

DAVID BOLY/WIREIMAGE.COM

To generate donations for scholarships that send needy kids to college, Bill Jones relies on his ability to motivate others. To raise thousands of dollars for his church, he calls on his talent at being persuasive. And to get dozens of people to help him organize community programs, he taps into his management skills. With all he does, it's hard to believe Bill Jones is actually retired. Sure, he could have taken a break and relaxed. But Bill Jones learned something even more valuable in the U.S. Marine Corps. He learned that giving back is better than sitting back.

UNSELFISHNESS

– WILLIAM JONES
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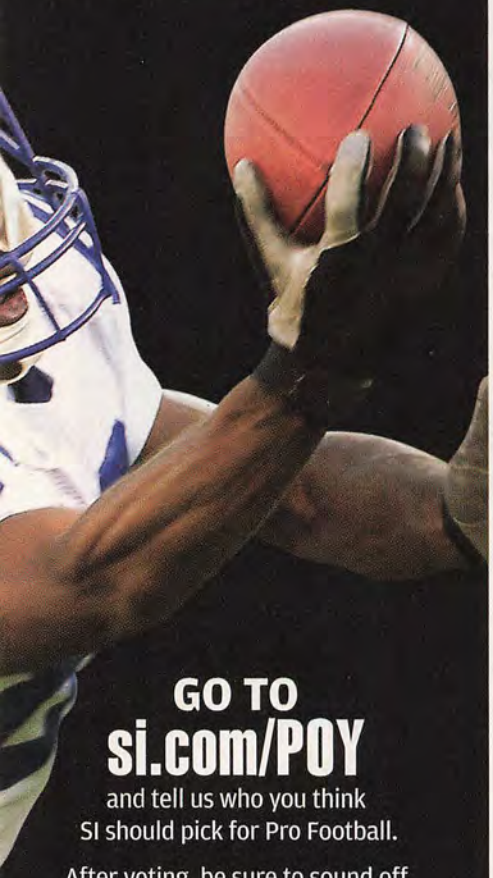

GO TO
si.com/POY
and tell us who you think SI should pick for Pro Football.

After voting, be sure to sound off on the most sportsmanlike and unsportsmanlike acts of the 2004 Pro Football season.

★

Stay tuned to
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and the pages of SI for all Pro Football Player of the Year updates.

Ford
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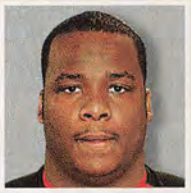
Faces in the Crowd



Terrill Byrd

CINCINNATI > Football

Terrill, a senior defensive lineman at Colerain High, had 21 sacks for a Cardinals defense that allowed only 6.5 points per game and helped the team to a 15–0 record and the Ohio Division I title. Named PrepNation.com's national defensive player of the year, he has committed to Cincinnati.

Caroline Ouellette

MONTREAL > Hockey

Ouellette, a senior forward at Minnesota-Duluth, had four goals and three assists, including her 200th career point, as she led the Bulldogs to a two-game sweep of Bemidji State. She was named Western Collegiate Hockey Association offensive player of the week for the third time this season.

Shane Tetterton

KENHORST, PA. > Bowling

Shane, a junior at Governor Mifflin High in Shillington, Pa., bowled six honors scores (games of 298, 299 or 300) in as many high school matches and had back-to-back 800-plus series, which is a U.S. high school first. During that run he had four perfect games.

Chelsea Marandola

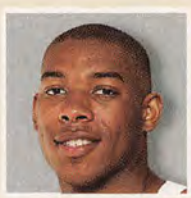
JOHNSTON, R.I. > Basketball

Chelsea, a senior guard at Johnston High, has scored 2,357 career points. She leads the 11–1 Panthers this season with averages of 27 points, eight rebounds and four steals per game. A three-time all-state player, she will attend Providence in the fall.

Heather Huffaker

DESOTO, TEXAS > Gymnastics

Huffaker, a sophomore at the University of Denver, won six events and back-to-back all-around titles within a four-day period for the Pioneers. She has three all-around titles this season (six for her career), leads the team in individual wins and is ranked fifth in the nation on the vault.



Jabari Saunders

JOLIET, ILL. > Basketball

Saunders, a junior forward at Saint Xavier University, scored a game-high 20 points and had eight rebounds in a 76–46 win over Indiana–South Bend. His 8 of 9 from the field raised his season field goal percentage to 72.5, the second best in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics.

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to **SI.com/faces.**

FROM TOP: RIVALS.COM; BRETT GROEHLER/UMD; COURTESY OF THE TETTERTON FAMILY; KATHY BORCHERS; UNIVERSITY OF DENVER PHOTOGRAPHY; MONTE GERLACH

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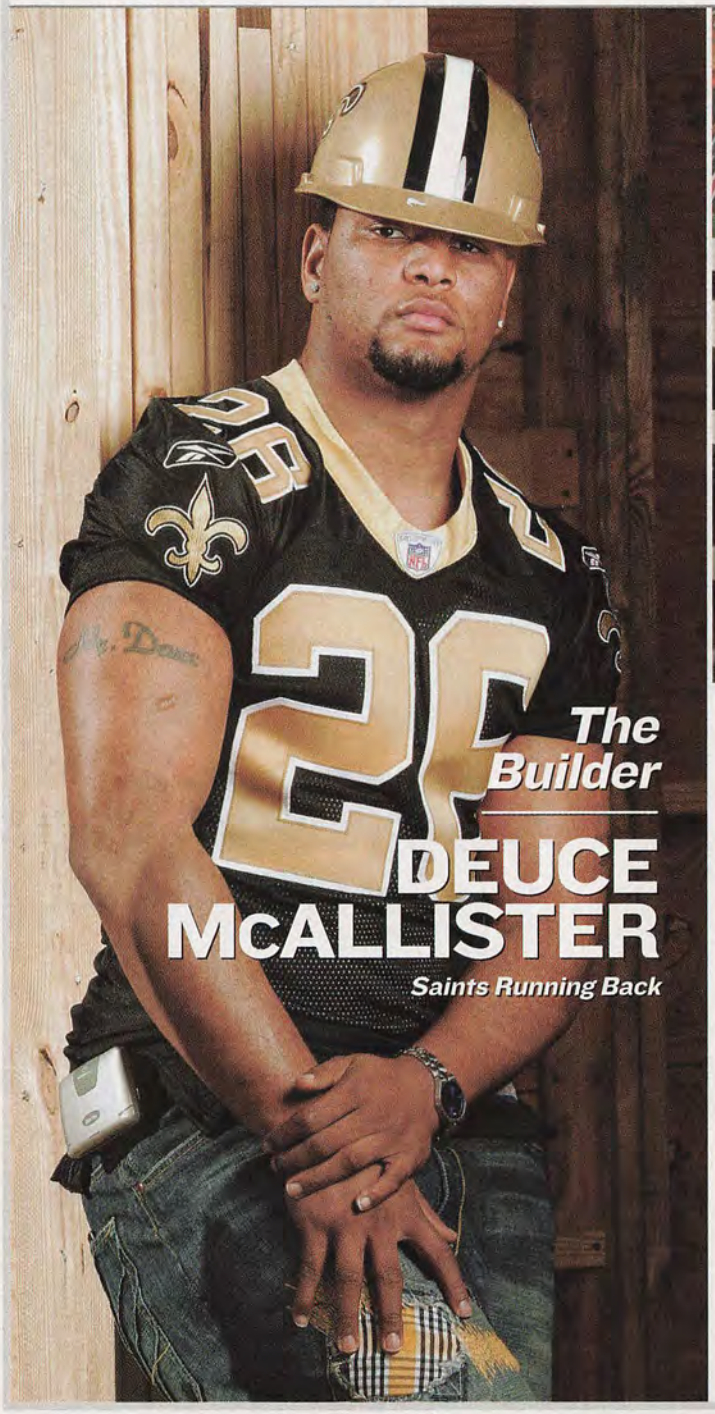


The Builder

DEUCE McALLISTER

Saints Running Back

McALLISTER, *26, is helping to renovate the 82-year-old King Edward Hotel in Jackson, Miss. The native Mississipian graduated from Ole Miss, to which he recently donated $1 million.*

ON THE RENOVATION It's been abandoned for a while [since the late 1960s], and city officials were throwing around the idea of restoring it. I got involved last year. Some said it shouldn't happen. Mississippi has gone through extremely racist times, and at this hotel black people weren't allowed to enter unless they were working or delivering. That was as late as 1967. I'm partners with HRI Properties Inc., a real-estate group, and we're going to turn it into office space, condos and apartments. It will help bring life to the downtown. We hope to have it done within two years.

ON BEING CRITICIZED FOR RESTORING A 'SYMBOL OF RACISM' I'm a big enough person to accept criticism. That we're at a point where minorities can own the building shows how far we've come. I believe we're doing something positive. Not only as a black person, but for Jackson and for Mississippi.

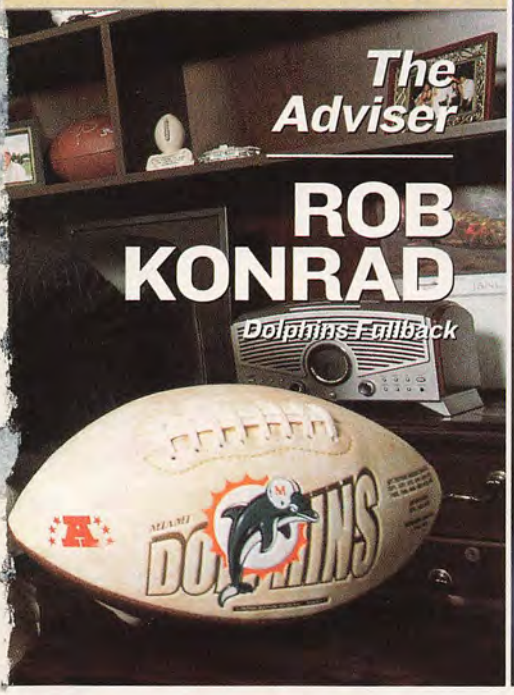
ON OPENING A NISSAN DEALERSHIP IN JACKSON THIS SUMMER I got involved through a friend who was a car dealer in Gulfport, Miss. I plan to be actively involved. The biggest thing in any business is how you treat your customers. If you treat them right, they'll come back. I can't say I'm greatly informed about dealerships and selling cars, but I'm learning.

ON THE TRUCKING BUSINESS My father, Carl, has been a truck driver for more than 30 years. He had taken me to 48 states by the time I was seven. He owns a few 18-wheelers. I own four and lease them out.

ON BEING A CRIMINAL JUSTICE MAJOR There's a possibility I'll go to law school down the road. It depends on how these business endeavors play out.

Edited by
KOSTYA KENNEDY AND B.J. SCHECTER

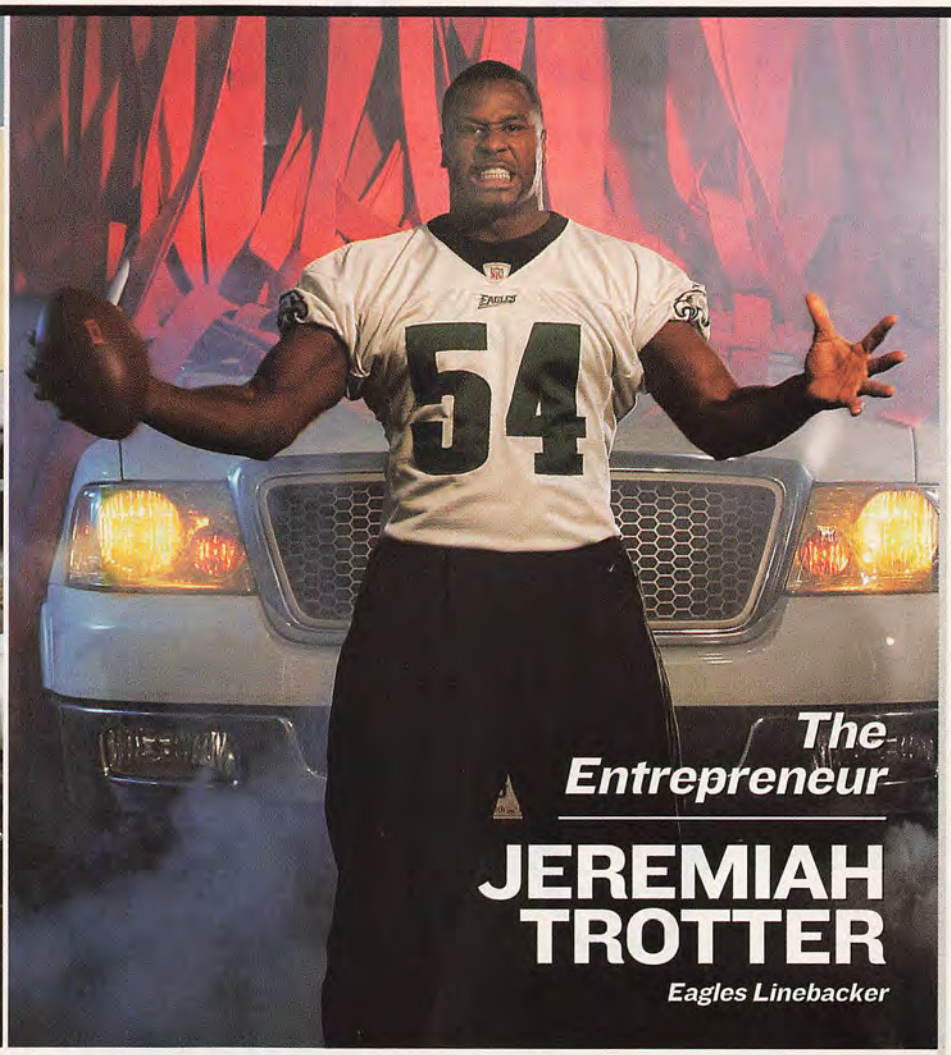
"I did everything I could possibly do . . . roses, reservations, teddy bears."
—SEAN MAY, TAR HEELS CENTER,
Valentine Memories, page 33



The Adviser

ROB KONRAD

Dolphins Fullback



The Entrepreneur

JEREMIAH TROTTER

Eagles Linebacker

KONRAD, ***28, is a partner at AllenKonrad, a wealth management firm that opened in Boca Raton, Fla., in 2003 and has about 500 clients.***

ON HIS BACKGROUND IN ASSET MANAGEMENT I studied finance at Syracuse, and I've always been interested in the markets. They incorporate everything—from politics to economic policy. Even sports come down to dollars and cents.

ON GETTING STARTED When I came into the league [in 1999], I saw players who needed help. I saw guys who made seven-figure salaries, and then one or two years after retirement they would be broke. To me that was not only sad, but also pretty scary. So I started out just giving some guys on the team advice. I came to the conclusion that this is what I wanted to do once I was done playing, so I got my Series 7 and 24 licenses, which allow you to sell securities and to manage and oversee employees.

ON ADVICE TO PLAYERS Spend less. When you come in at a young age and get checks for more than you've ever dreamed of, you think you have all the money in the world. You don't think about the day when you're not earning that kind of money. Guys also get intimidated by the people who come at them with investment advice. Athletes are prime targets. You would be shocked at what comes in our mailboxes. We're talking things like investing in emu. Guys have a hard time distinguishing a good investment from a bad investment.

ON WHO'S LISTENING About 40 of our clients are athletes. We have a few guys on the Dolphins and throughout the league. Also some pro golfers and hockey players. We help with everything: estate planning, health benefits, 401(k)s.

ON WEARING A SUIT Very different from putting on pads, but both are satisfying. The common thread is competition. Either you put on pads and compete physically or you get in front of a client and compete against other wealth managers.

TROTTER, ***28, runs T & I Unisex Salon in Willingboro, N.J., and Trott's Spot Car Wash in Cherry Hill, N.J. He's building two more car washes.***

ON HIS SALON I studied business management at Stephen F. Austin, and I had a passion to open my own business. I thought a salon would be an opportunity to get my feet wet. I'm in there every week. I get a haircut and take care of business.

ON EAGLES WHO COME IN Brian Dawkins, Hugh Douglas, L.J. Smith all stop by regularly. Now, [linebacker] Dhani Jones? He needs to swing by.

ON THE CAR WASH A friend of mine, Victor Thomas, was working for another car wash in Cherry Hill, and we became partners. I spent more then a year learning the business and going to car-wash events. They have conventions every summer, the past two in Las Vegas. Everyone in the industry goes and sets up booths to showcase products. New chemicals, tunnel equipment. It's a big deal.

ON HIS MOST POPULAR SERVICE Our LB Blitz package. It's our full-service package for $10.95. We also have the $8.95 price QB Sack package that people like. Our basic wash package costs $6.95 and is called a Safety.

ON WASHING TEAMMATE NATE WAYNE'S CAR TO GET HIS JERSEY NUMBER, 54 I offered to give him free car washes for a year, but he wanted me to *hand wash* his Mercedes myself one time instead. I said, 'You know what? I'm humble. I'll wash his car to get the number.' Of course, he threw a bucket of dirt on it before I washed it, but I got in there and scrubbed it clean.

ON HIS FIRST JOB At a tire store in Texas when I was 15. I'd change oil, fix flats. I was the fastest tire changer around. Senior year in high school I bagged groceries. My next job was the NFL. That's not a bad job at all.

—As told to Lisa Altobelli

RICK OLIVIER (MCALLISTER); BRIAN SMITH/CORBIS-OUTLINE (KONRAD); AL TIELEMANS (TROTTER); PEYTON WILLIAMS/ICON SMI (MAY)

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WHO'S Hot

NFL

First came a pregame ceremony featuring the bipartisan support of Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush and the crowd chanting *U-S-A* as cameras caught misty-eyed players on sideline. The halftime show ruffled neither the prudish nor the cynical—hey, no matter the cheese factor, you *have* to love a Beatle. Then the league got a three-point game, crowned a modern dynasty and called it Super Sunday.

Magglio Ordoñez

Big-time gambling does not end on Super Bowl Sunday. Consider: Ex–White Sox outfielder Magglio Ordoñez landed five-year, $75 million deal from the Tigers—even though he missed 110 games last year with knee injuries.

Jacksonville

All gussied up, city wowed crowds with nightly fireworks over the river, unending politeness and sunny, balmy Super Sunday. NFL commissioner called Jacksonville the Little Engine That Could, and said he expects the league to bring Super Bowl back.

The Game

For two weeks now we've been hearing about *The Game, The Game, The Game.* Of course, we're talking about 50 Cent and Dr. Dre protégé The Game (Jayceon Taylor). His debut album, *The Documentary,* opened at No. 1, then held at No. 2 on *Billboard* chart.

Carters

Nets Vince named an NBA All-Star starter for fifth time, while averaging 28.5 points as New Jersey won five of six. And don't feel bad Jimmy didn't get pregame face time with other ex-Presidents. He drew crowd to Jacksonville bookshop on Friday and signed his latest book, *Sharing Good Times.*

WHO'S Not

Freddie Mitchell

Mouthy Eagles wideout called out Patriots secondary days before the Super Bowl, telling Rodney Harrison, "I have something for you." Then he complained his team didn't give him podium time to meet the press. Mitchell had little for Harrison or Philly fans—one reception, 11 yards—while Harrison had two picks and a sack and was game's best defensive player.

Injuries

People just don't seem to be paying them any mind. Ordoñez snagged that contract; Eagles' Terrell Owens ran wild with screws in his ankle; and Pats' DE Richard Seymour cut down the run and pressured Donovan McNabb in Seymour's first game back from MCL tear in his left knee.

Jacksonville

The city faced complaints about shortage of hotel rooms and taxis, traffic crawled, and cold (sometimes wet) weather dampened festivities in days before Game. Nothing hurt more than the gouging: Souvenirs at ubiquitous riverside vendors cost *more* than at the airport.

Cheery Omens

L.A. radio star, and Eagles fan, Ralph Garman bought (for $760) a bowl of Apple Jacks a woman put on eBay after, she says, the Jacks miraculously settled into the Eagles' logo. "Every little bit helps," Garman told Knight Ridder last week. But instead of lucky charms, he got a cereal killer.

Early-Rising T-Wolves

After loss on Sunday, Minnesota has dropped seven of last nine day games. Coach Flip Saunders: "All of a sudden [your routine] is different. You get up and *boom*, you're going to the arena." Tough noogies, Flip. Some folks' alarms go off in the dark. And tougher noogies, T-Wolves fans. Six more matinees ahead.

VALENTINE MEMORIES

KEITH PRIMEAU, *Flyers Center*

My first date with my wife, Lisa, was on Valentine's Day in 1992. Lisa wanted to go see a movie, so we went to see *Fried Green Tomatoes.* She was crying coming out of the movie because it was so depressing. We had plans for dinner, but we didn't even bother to go.

SEAN MAY, *Tar Heels Center*

I had a real good one last year. I did everything I could possibly do for my girlfriend: roses, reservations, teddy bears, cards, everything. The whole nine yards. That's the first time I ever really cared about doing it. Her name was* Tiffany.

**It still is, but they've broken up.*

JEFF GROSS/GETTY IMAGES (MITCHELL); PRESTON MACK-US PRESSWIRE (BOAT); JONATHON DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES (GARNETT); DARRON CUMMINGS/AP (MAY); ARALDO DE LUCA/CORBIS (CUPID); DAVID E. KLUTHO (PRIMEAU); DAVID BERGMAN (CARTER); AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES (FIREWORKS); JULIE JACOBSON/AP (PATRIOTS)

The Questions *with* Carlos Arroyo

Pistons Point Guard

What was your welcome-to-the-NBA moment? My first game [with the Raptors in 2001], in Orlando, they put me in at the end. Troy Hudson came straight at me, scored like five baskets in a row. I couldn't handle him—he was so fast, and I was overwhelmed that I was really in the game.

Your most embarrassing moment? When I was a rookie, the veterans made me get up at a team breakfast and sing. It was pretty bad. I'm not telling what I sang. It's embarrassing enough.

What's your favorite off-day activity? My wife [Xiomara] and I go out like we're dating. We go to dinner and to the movies. We're apart a lot, so we try to make the time together special.

If I weren't in the NBA, I'd be . . . back in Fajardo [Puerto Rico, his hometown], probably helping my dad. He's a lawyer.

If I were commissioner for a day, I'd . . . make sure security is better. I've seen things like what happened in Detroit before, but to see it here, that isn't right.

Last Week

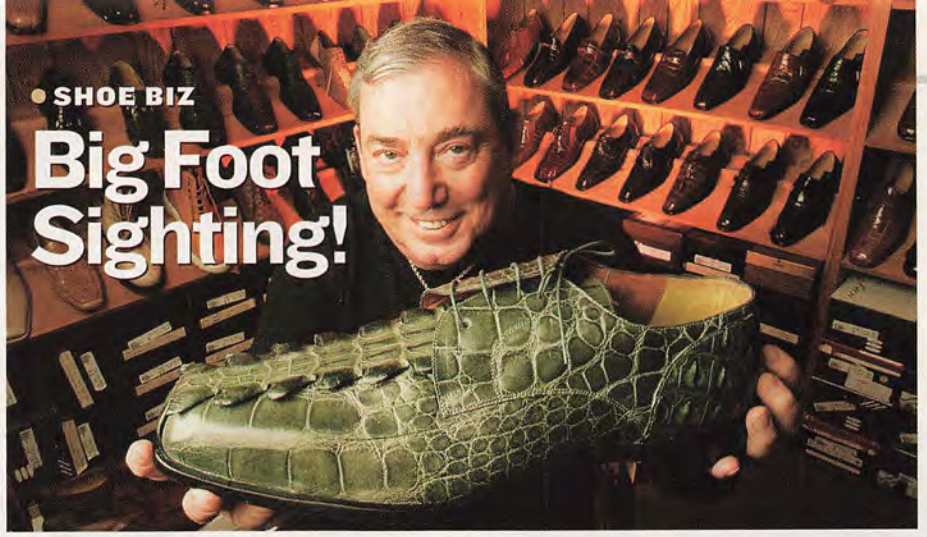
Arroyo, who had surgery to repair a broken nose on Jan. 31, had five assists in a loss to the Nets last Saturday *(right)*.

This Week

Pistons host Bucks, whose backup center, Daniel Santiago, started next to Arroyo on Puerto Rico's Olympic team.

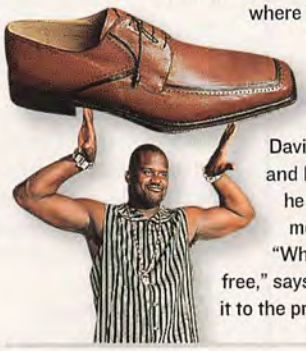
• SHOE BIZ

Big Foot Sighting!



SHAQUILLE O'NEAL (size 22D) has been a customer since he was 14. Don King spent $64,100 on a spree in 1995, and Oprah has done three segments on the store. For more than 30 years Friedman's Shoes in downtown Atlanta has catered to the large-footed man. The nondescript, three-level store features designer brands such as Steve Madden and Cole Haan, and Friedman's own line. There's also a "skins room," for shoes made from alligator, lizard, snake and ostrich. Many shoes go for as little as $50 (when you buy two pairs), but a snazzy gator skin, size 17, will set you back $895.

When Phillip Friedman opened the store in 1929, it sold used shoes. In 1958 Bruce Teilhaber *(above)*, Friedman's son-in-law, who eventually took over the store in '72, began buying odd lots of shoes, which included "oversizers." He discovered a huge demand for loafers as big as the *Santa Maria*, and word spread to pro athletes from many sports. These days Friedman's clients include Willie McGinest, Lennox Lewis, Gary Sheffield and Chris Webber. In 1982 Friedman's opened a women's store down the block, where WNBA players—and Shaq's mom, Lucille (size 13)—shop.



Though you can often see superstars prowling the aisles, nearly 50% of Friedman's annual sales comes through the store's website, www.largefeet.com. However they shop, athletes are Friedman's best customers. When the Celtics played the Hawks on Jan. 22, forward Ricky Davis spent more than $600 on six pairs of shoes, including Steve Maddens and Mezlans. "I knew what I wanted to get, and I knew they would have it," he said. And before Shaq *(left)* got married in 2002 he bought all his groomsmen $1,000 black Fa Cri King Tail alligator shoes and a pair for himself. "When I was 14 I couldn't afford their shoes so Friedman's gave me them for free," says Shaq. "The only promise [Teilhaber] made me make was if I ever made it to the pros, I would come to him to get my shoes."

—Sarah Thurmond

• BEST PERSONAL WEBSITES

In Full Bloom

Jeremy Bloom, *Football Player, Mogul Skier*

WHETHER TEARING up the slopes as the world's No. 1 freestyle mogul skier, modeling for Tommy Hilfiger and Abercrombie & Fitch or taking on the NCAA, Jeremy Bloom's life is full of action—and his website, www.jeremybloom.com, is no different. The site features motion graphics, sound bites from Bloom updating fans on his life on and off the slopes, music (including *N.E.R.D*, one of Bloom's favorite groups) and video highlights. Bloom, who won his fourth consecutive World Cup mogul event on Sunday, was a star receiver and kick returner for Colorado for two seasons before the NCAA ruled him ineligible last year for accepting endorsement money to finance his training for the 2006 Olympics. Though Bloom, 22, will concentrate on skiing, he's passionate about football (he wears a helmet painted gold with Colorado Buffaloes emblems on the sides), and the site opens to clips of him competing in both sports. "Ever since he was young, he would walk around the house with a football," says Bloom's mother, Char. "Jeremy and football [always] went together." Then there's the Eye Candy section made up of images of Bloom as a hunky, guy-next-door model. To keep it fresh Bloom changes the look of the site every six months and updates the content frequently.

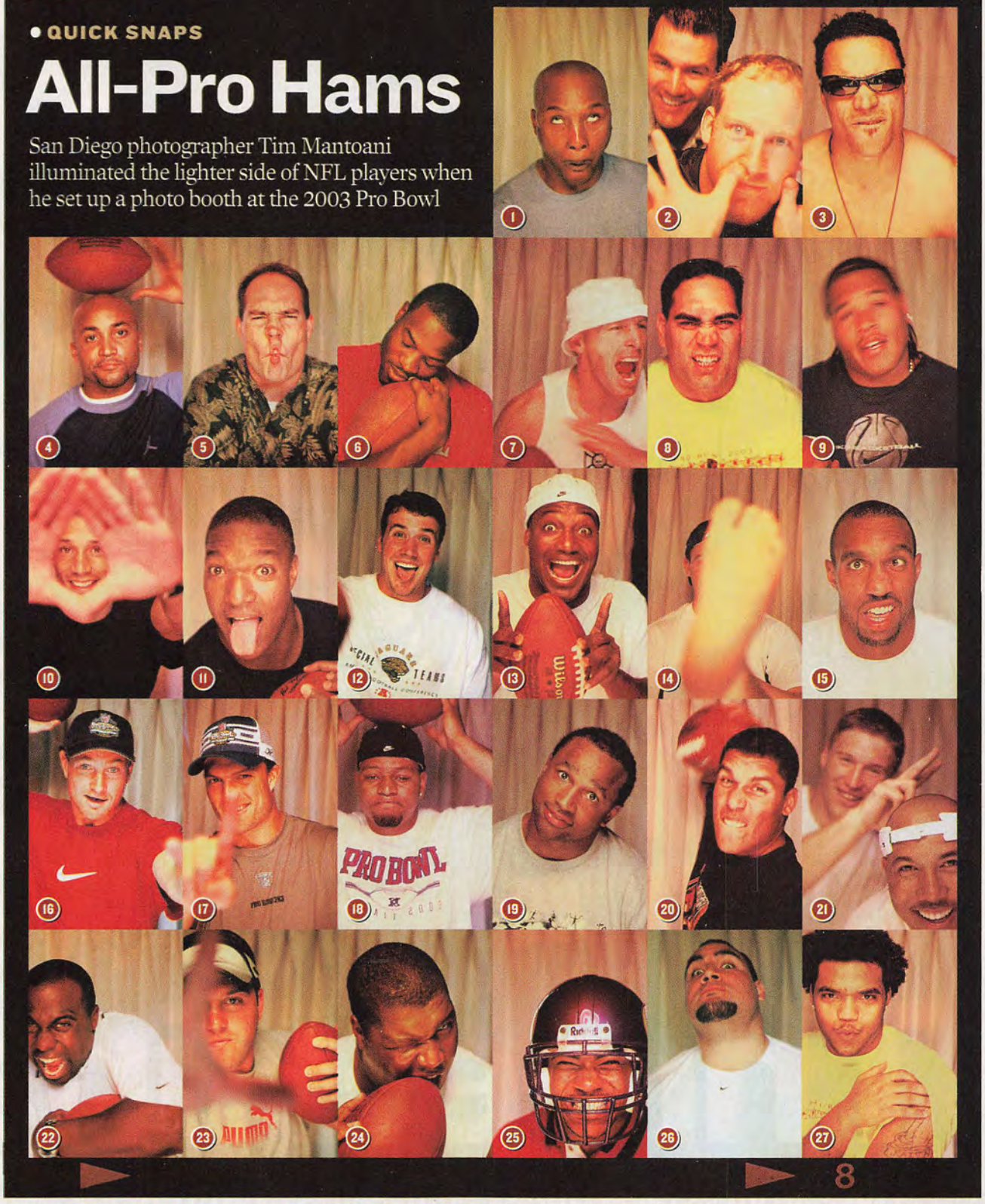
—S.T.

GREG FOSTER (2, FRIEDMAN'S AND SHOE); ELSA/GETTY IMAGES (KING); MICHAEL MARTIN/ICON SMI (BLOOM PLAYING FOOTBALL); COURTESY OF JEREMYBLOOM.COM (SCREENGRAB); LAURA RAUCH/AP (BLOOM SKIING); SCOTT HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES (SHAQ); JOHN BIEVER (ARROYO); LOU CAPOZZOLA (ARROYO DRIBBLING)

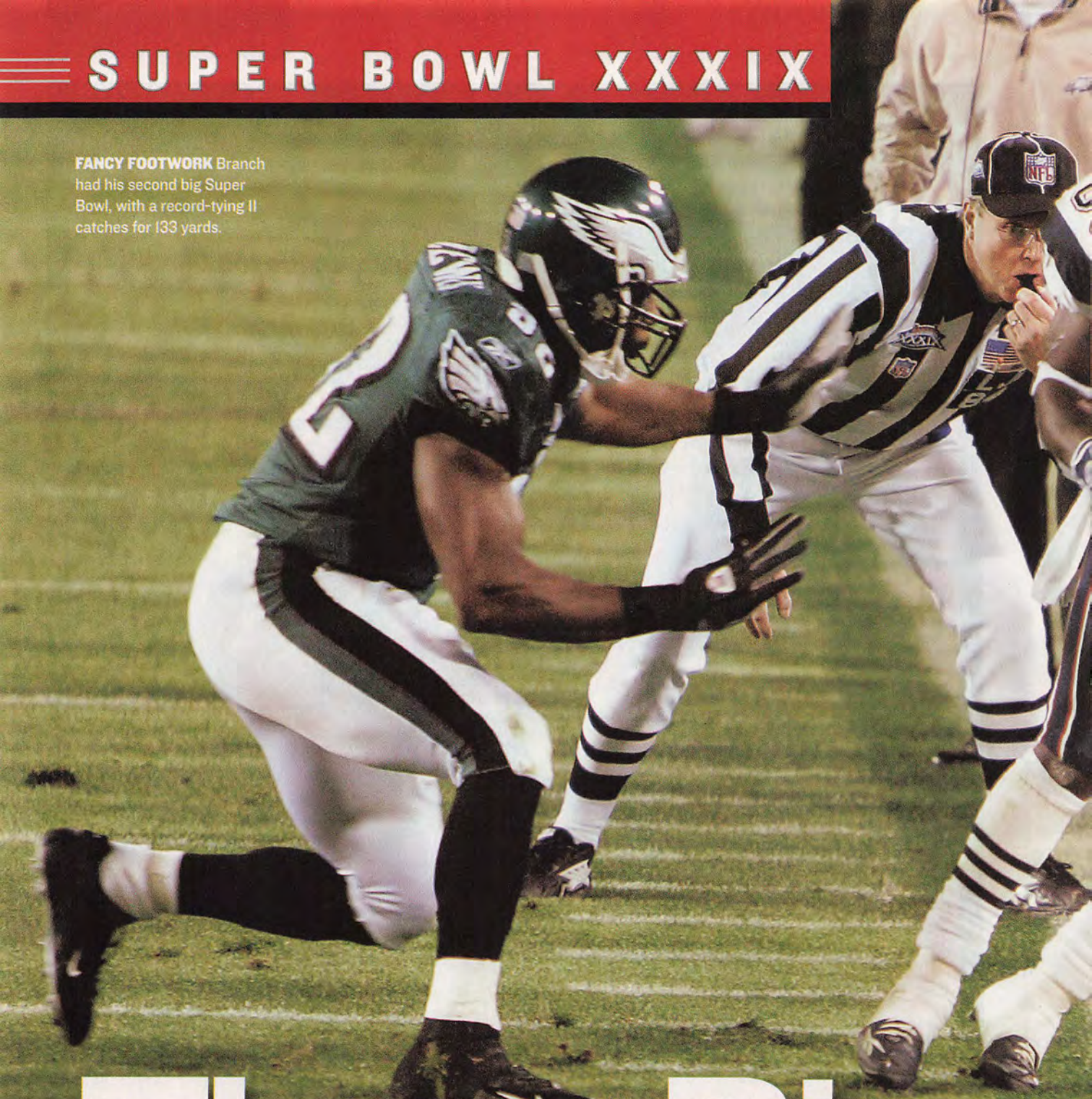
• QUICK SNAPS

All-Pro Hams

San Diego photographer Tim Mantoani illuminated the lighter side of NFL players when he set up a photo booth at the 2003 Pro Bowl



Can you name the players? They're listed with team they represented at the '03 Pro Bowl 1. Fred McAfee, RB, *Saints* 2. Larry Izzo *(right)*, LB, and Adam Vinatieri, K, *Pats* 3. Tony Gonzalez, TE, *Chiefs* 4. Bobby Taylor, DB, *Eagles* 5. Chad Lewis, TE, *Eagles* 6. Simeon Rice, DE, *Bucs* 7. Jeff Garcia, QB, *49ers* 8. Kevin Mawae, C, *Jets* 9. Ron Stone, G, *49ers* 10. Brock Marion, DB, *Dolphins* 11. Chris Samuels, RT, *Redskins* 12. Chris Hanson, P, *Jaguars* 13. Derrick Brooks, LB, *Bucs* 14. David Akers, K, *Eagles* 15. Julian Peterson, LB, *49ers* 16. Brad Johnson, QB, *Bucs* 17. John Lynch, S, *Bucs* 18. Deuce McAllister, RB, *Saints* 19. Lorenzo Neal, FB, *Bengals* 20. Donnie Edwards, LB, *Chargers* 21. Todd Heap *(left)*, TE, *Ravens*, and Hines Ward, WR, *Steelers* 22. Marshall Faulk, RB, *Rams* 23. Todd Sauerbrun, P, *Panthers* 24. Lincoln Kennedy, T, *Raiders* 25. Michael Bennett, RB, *Vikings* 26. Marco Rivera, G, *Packers* 27. Richard Seymour, RT, *Pats*

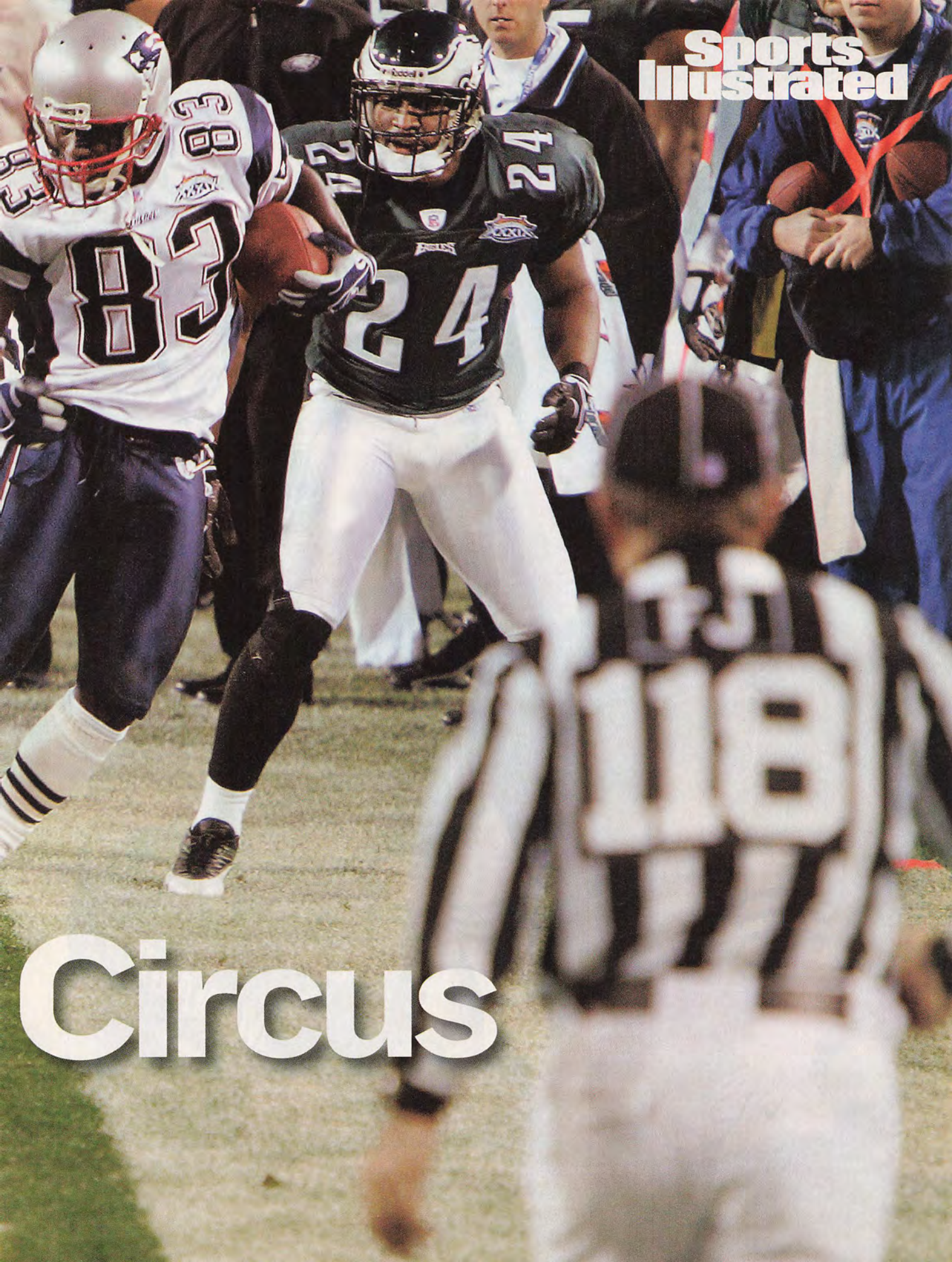


FANCY FOOTWORK Branch had his second big Super Bowl, with a record-tying 11 catches for 133 yards.

Three-Ring

The Patriots staked their claim as the century's first dynasty and the Greatest Show on Turf, beating the Eagles for their third NFL title in four seasons

BY MICHAEL SILVER *Photograph by* Heinz Kluetmeier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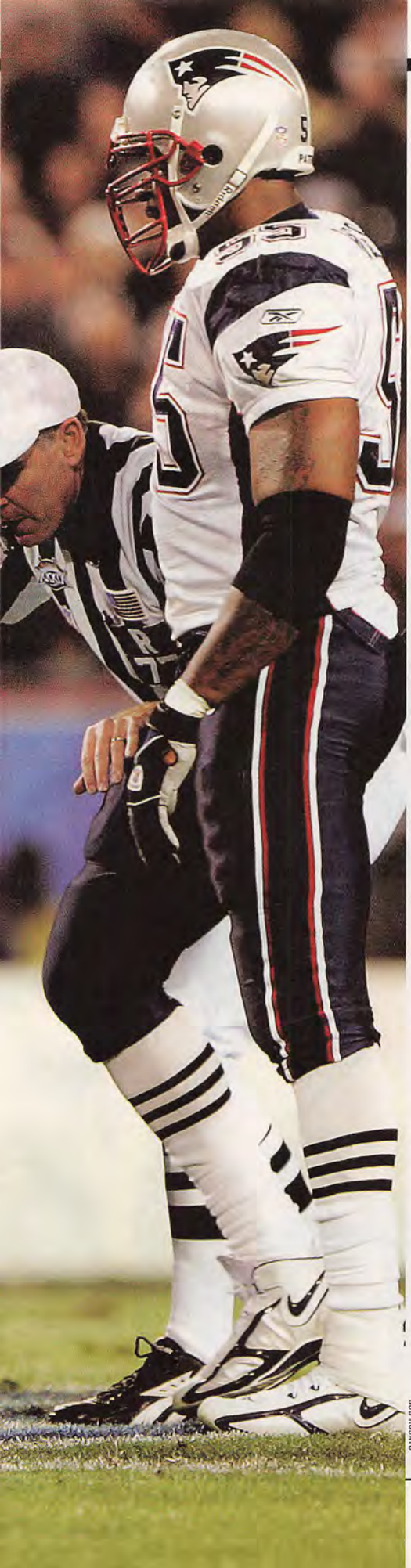


BOB ROSATO

NO HARD FEELINGS Vrabel (50) offered a helping hand after knocking down McNabb for one of the Patriots' four sacks.

BECAUSE THEY do not beat you over the head with their excellence or beat their chests in triumph, the New England Patriots are forever being cast as commonplace champions. They are great in the way that a chocolate milk shake is great, as poised and proficient as the Beach Boys' doing background harmonies onstage. What we are slowly but surely learning from the Pats as they forge the first football dynasty of the 21st century is that dominance comes in many forms, and that sometimes doing the little things well can provide the biggest satisfaction of all. ¶ As these Patriots keep escaping with three-point victories and kicking dirt on the Super Bowl's heritage of wretched excess, skipping individual pregame introductions and engaging in comparatively low-key locker room celebrations, isn't it time we stop being perplexed by their success? Yes, New England's 24–21 victory over the Philadelphia Eagles in Super Bowl XXXIX on Sunday night in Jacksonville was another testament to teamwork, tenacity and the strategic acumen of coach Bill Belichick and his staff. But in vanquishing a brasher opponent to claim the NFL's ultimate prize for the second consecutive year—and the third time in four seasons, matching the record run of the Dallas Cowboys from 1992 to '95—the Pats' players proved they are even more potent than typically perceived.

"Someday I'm going to have kids and tell them I played on one of the greatest teams of all time, a team with a whole lot of great players," said 11th-year outside linebacker Willie McGinest, whose deployment at defensive end was the key to New England's surprise scheme change for the title game. "You might not call them stars, but they just went out and embarrassed people in the biggest game of their lives, so why wouldn't they be stars? It doesn't matter if we won by three or 103—we don't give a damn if people downplay our accomplishments, because all we want to do is win."

So before the coronation of the plucky Patriots as the team of the decade, let's get this much straight: As they proved again in front of 78,125 fans at Alltel Stadium and an estimated 80 million television viewers worldwide, the Pats are more than Belichick's brain and quarterback Tom Brady's golden right arm. Defenders like McGinest, fellow linebackers Tedy Bruschi and Mike Vrabel and strong safety Rodney Harrison, whose second interception of Donovan McNabb iced the game with nine seconds remaining, showed that they're elite players, while unheralded wideout Deion Branch (LIFE OF REILLY, *page 84*) seized footballs out of the cool night sky and the MVP award from Brady's grasp.

"Someday I'm going to have kids and tell them I played on one of the GREATEST TEAMS of all time," said McGinest.

"It's awesome to see a guy like Deion win it," said Brady (23 of 33, 236 yards, two touchdowns), a two-time Super Bowl MVP. "The guy has done everything he can for this team, and this is a team full of guys who cheer for one another. The MVP is nice, but that's not why you play. I'm playing for that diamond ring that's as big as a belt buckle."

New England's first two titles came cour-

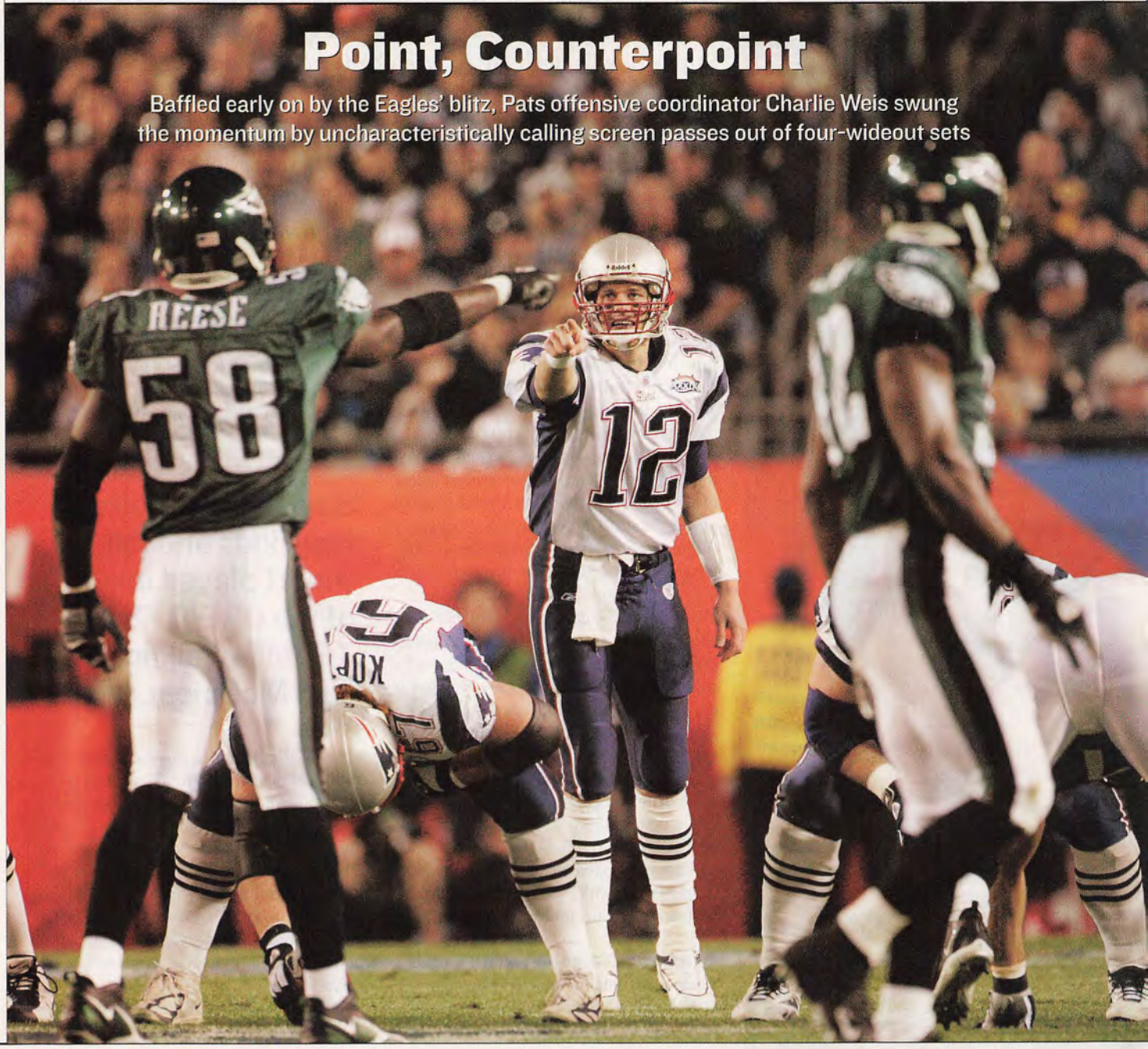
tesy of Adam Vinatieri field goals in the final seconds—and this victory was only slightly less tense. Again, the Pats relied on their patented formula of individual opportunism, selflessness, innovative game-planning and emotion fueled by perceived disrespect. The last of those came after the Patriots received a copy of an e-mail sent from an Eagles official to a member of the Boston Red Sox organization seeking advice on a prospective victory parade, a missive that Belichick milked for maximum effect during his address to the Pats on Sunday morning at the team's hotel in St. Augustine.

But it was the Eagles, despite being seven-point underdogs, who supplied the bulk of the pregame bluster, from wideout Terrell Owens's assertion that God would heal his right ankle in time to play to fellow wideout Freddie Mitchell's digs at Harrison and the other New England defensive backs. Even Chuck Bednarik, the 79-year-old Hall of Famer and former Eagle, popped off, saying his bitterness toward the Philadelphia organization would compel him to root for the Patriots. Meanwhile, rowdy Eagles fans, who greatly outnumbered their New England counterparts, flocked to congested downtown Jacksonville.

The Patriots didn't make much noise, but behind the scenes they had issues. In an effort to keep McNabb from scrambling, Belichick and defensive coordinator Romeo Crennel junked their 3–4 set in favor of a 4–3 alignment—the Cali front, so named in honor of California native McGinest—in which the veteran linebacker shifted to pass-rushing end. The idea was to cut off the edges and form a semicircle around McNabb, thus discouraging him from throwing to the inside or running.

Point, Counterpoint

Baffled early on by the Eagles' blitz, Pats offensive coordinator Charlie Weis swung the momentum by uncharacteristically calling screen passes out of four-wideout sets



Going back to Cali unnerved the Pats, who hadn't practiced that alignment since the preseason. When Crennel streamlined the game plan on the Monday before the game, "there were some raised eyebrows," admitted veteran linebacker Ted Johnson. Practices on Wednesday and Thursday, fellow linebacker Roman Phifer added, were "horrible" for the defense, marred by bad communication, erroneous presnap reads and other frequent mental mistakes.

Rather than rail at his charges, Crennel adhered to the Patriot Method, polling the players on what they thought would fix the situation. The consensus: Simplify the scheme. "If you keep hearing from your players that there are too many checks, that means there probably are," Crennel said. "So we cut it back. After the Friday practice we were able to sleep easier."

While the Pats' defense flustered McNabb (30 of 51, 357 yards, three touchdowns) from the outset, ultimately sacking him four times and intercepting three passes while limiting him to zero rushing yards, New England's offense began the game as if in a slumber. Having fallen behind 7–0 on McNabb's six-yard scoring pass to tight end L.J. Smith with 10:02 left in the second quarter—just the second time in their last 27 games they'd failed to score first—the Patriots drove to the Philly four, only to lose the ball when Brady fumbled after bumping into running back Kevin Faulk on a play-fake.

New England finally tied the game on Brady's four-yard pass to wideout David Givens 1:16 before halftime and took a 14–7 lead with 11:09 left in the third quarter on a two-yard scoring toss from Brady to Vrabel, marking the second consecutive Super Bowl in which the moonlighting linebacker

DAMIAN STROHMEYER

ULTIMATE GOAL Faulk set up the score that put New England ahead to stay by hauling in a screen pass from Brady (opposite).

THINGS LOOKED bad for the Patriots. With a little less than 10 minutes left in the second quarter, they were down 7–0 to an Eagles defense that seemed as if it were about to swallow up running back Corey Dillon and quarterback Tom Brady and his pack of nifty wideouts. Four series had produced 37 yards of offense, a sack, two penalties and no third-down conversions. Now New England was backed up on its 13-yard line. "We were just playing so tight," said tight end Christian Fauria. "We were worrying about their blitz. We couldn't figure out who to block."

It was especially worrisome for Charlie Weis, the offensive coordinator who will coach Notre Dame next fall. After Weis signed on with the Irish on Dec. 12 and the Patriots lost to the Dolphins eight days later, the grumbles started—something to the effect of trying to serve two masters. "Sure it hurt," Weis said on Sunday night, after the Pats' 24–21 Super Bowl triumph. "You can say that taking the Notre Dame job had nothing to do with the fact that we turned the ball over four times against Miami, but it still hurt inside."

So before he sent Brady out in the second quarter against Philadelphia, Weis told him, "We're going with four wide receivers. I want to spread them out so you can see where your pressure is coming from." Then he gave Brady the snapper: The first two plays were going to be screen passes to Dillon. "Now that really surprised me," Brady said. "In the four years I've been quarterbacking [the Patriots], I can't remember him calling a screen out of a four-wide formation. But that's Charlie. Expect the unexpected. It was a hell of a time to bring it out."

Another failed series, a punt from deep in its own territory, followed by a decent Eagles return and more points on the board could have been very strong medicine for a shaky offense to stomach. Instead, the Patriots got 29 yards out of their two completions, moving them out to their 42, and then drove deep into Philly territory. Brady wound up fumbling at the four, but the New England defense forced a punt and the Patriots put seven on the board on their next series. After the game many New England players said the two screens had turned the momentum.

Even better, the screens had put a hold on the Eagles' blitzes. The book says that when a team goes four wide, you blitz—and that's what Philadelphia did. But the screens knocked the Eagles back on their heels, made them scratch their heads before they sent the rushers in again.

At halftime the score was 7–7, and Weis did another unusual thing. He scripted the first 10 plays of the second half. "I was counting on the long, 25-minute halftime," he said.

This time the Patriots' first four possessions produced three scores—touchdown, touchdown, field goal—mostly from multiple-wideout sets, one time using five receivers. They worked Deion Branch, who had a Super Bowl–record-tying 11 catches, out of the slot. "Game plan stuff," wideout David Givens said in reference to what the Pats faced. "Man coverage against the slot receiver, zone against the outside guys." And New England went back to the screen pass; on the touchdown drive that put the Pats ahead to stay, Brady's two longest completions came on screens of 13 and 14 yards to running back Kevin Faulk.

Still in three- and four-wideout alignments, Weis ran Dillon and Faulk between the tackles for good gains. "They defended the stretch play outside too well," Fauria said, "so we hit them inside. We played their tendencies. Give Charlie two weeks to prepare, and he'll kill people."

"It's the end of my NFL career," Weis said. "I wanted to see it end right."

"He was a little emotional [after the game]," center Dan Koppen said. "Good for him. I'm just happy we could send him off the way we should."

—Paul Zimmerman

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

caught a touchdown pass. Yet when McNabb whipped a 10-yard scoring pass to running back Brian Westbrook to tie the game with 3:39 remaining in the third quarter, the raucous Philly fans asserted themselves like Broad Street Bullies.

If the Philly faithful thought Brady would be fazed, they haven't been paying attention the past four years, during which the 2000 sixth-round draft pick has ensured himself a place in the Hall of Fame. Following an emotional week in which his 94-year-old grandmother, Margaret, died, Brady exuded an eerie calm when the situation was most tense. He was 4 for 4 on the Pats' nine-play, 66-yard drive, with running back Corey Dillon providing the go-ahead points on a two-yard run with

"All he does is talk," Belichick said of the outspoken Mitchell. **"HE'S TERRIBLE.** I was glad when he was in the game."

13:44 left. On New England's next drive Brady and Branch hooked up on the play of the night, a pass over the middle on which the third-year receiver leaped over the back of Philly cornerback Sheldon Brown to turn a possible pick into a 19-yard reception. Six plays later Vinatieri's 22-yard field goal put the Pats up 24–14.

"Outside of that terrible first quarter, we felt we had the game under control," said Branch, who had 133 receiving yards on 11 catches—tying the Super Bowl record shared by Cincinnati Bengals tight end Dan Ross and San Francisco 49ers wideout Jerry Rice, the last receiver to be named MVP (16 years ago). That followed up a 10-catch, 143-yard effort in New England's 32–29 Super Bowl victory over the Carolina Panthers last season.

Yet for all his brilliance, Branch wasn't the most impressive wideout on the field. That distinction belonged to Owens, who 6½ weeks after surgery on his ankle, responded with a nine-catch, 122-yard show

CUTTING EDGE Dillon wasn't dominant, but he chipped in with 75 yards rushing, another 31 yards receiving and a fourth-quarter TD.

BILL FRAKES

Riddell
28

of grit. Alas, the same could not be said for the Eagles' other loudmouth receiver, Mitchell, who had angered the easy-to-rile Harrison in the wake of the Pats' 41–27 victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers in the AFC Championship Game by saying he "had something" for the two-time Pro Bowler and that he didn't know the names of New England's cornerbacks. Though Harrison and his friends in the secondary had hoped to hit Mitchell harder than the media slammed Jacksonville (which was derided all week as a second-rate Super Bowl city), they had to settle for limiting him to a single catch for 11 yards.

"All he does is talk," Belichick said of Mitchell long after the game as he sat in his locker room office, his feet propped on a desk. "He's terrible, and you can print that. I was happy when he was in the game."

WELL-RECEIVED Owens hardly missed a step after undergoing surgery on his right ankle, grabbing nine passes for 122 yards.

For all his brilliance, Branch wasn't the MOST IMPRESSIVE wideout on the field. That distinction belonged to Owens.

The coach undoubtedly was pleased with Eagles coach Andy Reid's curious decision to forgo a no-huddle offense while trailing by 10 with 5:40 to go. When the Eagles (15–4) completed a 79-yard scoring drive on McNabb's 30-yard strike to wideout Greg Lewis, only 1:48 remained. After the Pats' Christian Fauria recovered David Akers's onside kick, the Eagles' defense held, but New England punter Josh Miller pinned Philly at its own four with 46 seconds remaining, and Harrison's interception set off a fitting release of red, white and blue confetti.

Belichick, his gray, hooded pullover doused with Gatorade (thanks to Bruschi, who also soaked the coach's 86-year-old father, Steve), celebrated by initiating a hearty group hug with his outgoing coordinators, Crennel and offensive whiz Charlie Weis *(box, page 40)*. Both men were about to become head coaches—Crennel with the Cleveland Browns, Weis with Notre Dame—but first they wanted to savor a second consecutive 17–2 season and the team's historic run. "What did we say, Charlie?" Belichick asked about the words exchanged during the trio's embrace. "I forget."

Weis smiled. "We said we'd been together a long time," he recalled. "We'd had some good times, some bad, but these are moments we'd always have together. And it wouldn't matter that we wouldn't be together anymore. You can be the richest man in the world and not be able to buy moments like this."

PETER READ MILLER

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CLINCHER Belichick celebrated the Pats' third title in four seasons after Harrison's interception with nine seconds left.

Belichick's next challenge will be working with two new coordinators, but enough will be the same in New England to make the Pats the team to beat again in '05. "Five years ago, when I was about to hire Bill, we were having dinner at the Capital Grille in Chestnut Hill," Patriots owner Robert Kraft recalled after the game. "I said, 'Promise me that when we have success that you won't change,' and he has been true to that promise." The coach demands similar humility from his players, who in the words of backup linebacker and special teams ace Matt Chatham, are "all drinking the Kool-Aid. Everybody buys into the team concept, and we'd be stupid not to."

"When you work together—when you embrace words like *dignity*, *integrity* and *unselfishness*—great things can be accomplished," said Bruschi, who thwarted an Eagles drive with an interception at the New England 24 with 7:20 left. Realizing that he, too, was falling into a familiar trap, the ninth-year linebacker caught himself and laughed. "And if you've got some ballers in your locker room," Bruschi added, "you'll win a lot of Super Bowls."

> "You can be the richest man in the world," Patriots assistant Charlie Weis said, "and **NOT BUY MOMENTS** like this."

Several hours later, as the clock struck three at the World Golf Village in St. Augustine, Bruschi beamed as Brady entered the VIP section of the team's victory party. The quarterback got the rock-star treatment as he cruised around the room, pausing with teammates to pose for photos with the Lombardi Trophy. Holding his thumb and pinkie together to signify the Pats' three titles, Brady toted the shiny silver football to Vrabel's table, then took it over to Bruschi.

Before and after another camera clicked, neither star said a word. There was no need to. □

PETER READ MILLER

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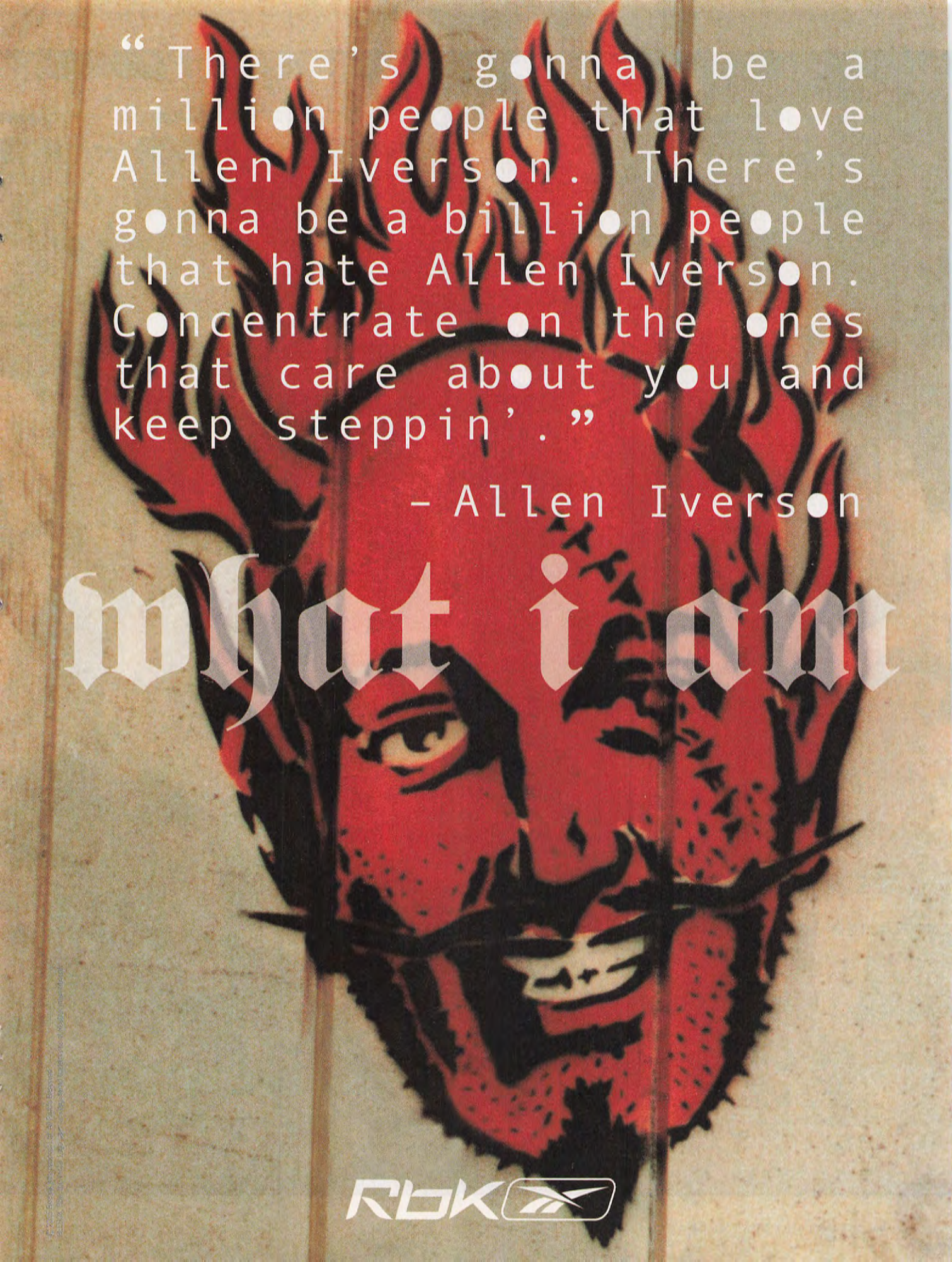

"There's gonna be a million people that love Allen Iverson. There's gonna be a billion people that hate Allen Iverson. Concentrate on the ones that care about you and keep steppin'."
- Allen Iverson
what i am
RBK

TWO TOUGH Less than 24 hours after a draining home win over the Knicks, the Kings were in Portland, where the Blazers tried to run them off the court.

Double Whammy

It may sound easy—play twice in two nights—but back-to-back games take a heavy toll on NBA teams, and the Kings paid the price a couple of times last week

BY JACK McCALLUM

Photographs by Robert Beck

LAST WEEK the Sacramento Kings found themselves bruised and battered and—much worse—back-to-backed. Trying to keep pace with the San Antonio Spurs, Phoenix Suns and Seattle SuperSonics in the Western Conference, the Kings were in desperate need of a few days off to ease the sore left knee of power forward Chris Webber, the aching back of small forward Peja Stojakovic, the cranky right ankle of point guard Mike Bibby and the entire corpus of shooting guard Cuttino Mobley (back, ribs, groin, ankle). And if they couldn't get rest, then they at least needed time for a decent practice to search for cohesion with so many players going in and out of the lineup.

ROAD BLOCK Bibby & Co. faced the toughest task—playing home, then away.

Instead, Sacramento was playing four games in five nights, bunched in two-game clusters known as back-to-backs, a torture endemic to the NBA. "Other than defending the pick-and-roll," says reigning MVP Kevin Garnett of the Minnesota Timberwolves, "back-to-backs are the most difficult thing in this league."

The Kings lost at home to the Sonics 106–101 on Feb. 1, then beat the Warriors 111–107 the following night in Oakland. After a day off they needed a com-

bined 75 points from Bibby and center Brad Miller to squeak by the New York Knicks 116–115 in the friendly confines of Arco Arena; some 21 hours later, last Saturday night, they succumbed to the inferior Trail Blazers 114–108 in Portland.

The Blazers themselves were playing their fourth game in five nights, having beaten the expansion Charlotte Bobcats 101–89 at home on Friday night. But there are degrees of toughness in back-to-backs *(chart, page 54)*, and Sacramento's home-then-road combination is the toughest. "The Kings had to do a lot of battling to win their first game, and then they had to get on a plane and come up here," said Portland guard Nick Van Exel, who combined with Damon Stoudamire for 53 points in Saturday's win. "We knew that. You definitely study the back-to-backs. We were waiting, and we went right after them."

Cue the chorus of cynics. All together now: *Soooooo whaaaaat!* Auto mechanics, teachers, chimney sweepers—all have work schedules that are back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back. Plus, NBA players fly on charter jets that would please a Turkish pasha, stay in first-class hotels, ride cushy buses to and from arenas and airports, and get paid millions to drag their behinds up and down 94 feet of hardwood.

True. But in no other sport—indeed, in few other professions—is the grind so extreme and the wear and tear as concentrated as it is in the NBA, and the worst of it is back-to-backs. NHL teams (when they're not locked out) endure them too, but with half the frequency. Baseball players may play more games in a row, but their sport is less physically demanding. And aside from travel days, they never bounce from city to city; they can actually hang up their clothes in a hotel room during a road stand and fall into some semblance of a routine. NBA players are leaves in the wind, at home tonight, in Houston tomorrow, at home two days later, in Denver the day after that.

By design, the number of back-to-backs generally diminishes as the season goes on, and they're rare in the playoffs, when the NBA spaces out its schedule to maximize television coverage. However, a team's character can be forged in those difficult winter months when it guts out W's in tough back-to-backs, when legs are tired and there's little time to prepare. Last year's champions, the Detroit Pistons, won the second leg of back-to-backs 15 of 23 times, and the 2003 champions, the San Antonio Spurs, won 13 of 18. "It's the time to make a statement in those second games," says Van Exel.

It's also the time for coaches to make hard decisions. Rest an injured player on the first night? Cancel a practice if a difficult back-to-back looms? Tell your team to fast-break against a back-to-backed opponent, even if your team isn't particularly strong in transition? "Back-to-backs are not only physically taxing," says Adelman, "they're mentally taxing too."

Not to mention a provocative topic in the National Bitching Association. "A young team like us gets loaded up on back-to-backs," says the Atlanta Hawks forward Kevin Willis, the senior member of that team—of the league, in fact—at 42. "The teams that are going to be on TV have to get their rest." He happens to be right. Along with the Chicago Bulls, the Hawks, by season's end, will have played the most back-to-backs (112) since 2000–01. They can also lay claim to the most nightmarish back-to-back so far this season. After losing 106–96 to the Miami Heat at home on Jan. 28, they got caught in an ice storm at the airport and didn't make it to Memphis until 5:45 the next night. The 7 p.m. tip-off was pushed back until 8, and Atlanta lost an 84–83 heartbreaker.

Even execs, coaches and players on good teams whisper that back-to-backs are doled out inequitably. (Such is their paranoia that they won't speak for attribution, lest they get back-to-backed to death on next year's schedule.) "The league was able to make sure Shaquille O'Neal and the Miami Heat played Kobe Bryant and the Los Angeles Lakers on Christmas Day," says one Western Conference coach, "so they can do anything they want with the schedule." The Los Angeles Clippers would seem to have a reasonable beef: By season's end they will have played 107 back-to-backs over five years,

Dire Straights

Here's who thrives under the pressure of consecutive games—and who buckles

Among players who, through Sunday, have averaged 10 points and played at least 15 back-to-backs since the start of last season, these had the biggest scoring swings in the second games.

THE BEST: Rashard Lewis

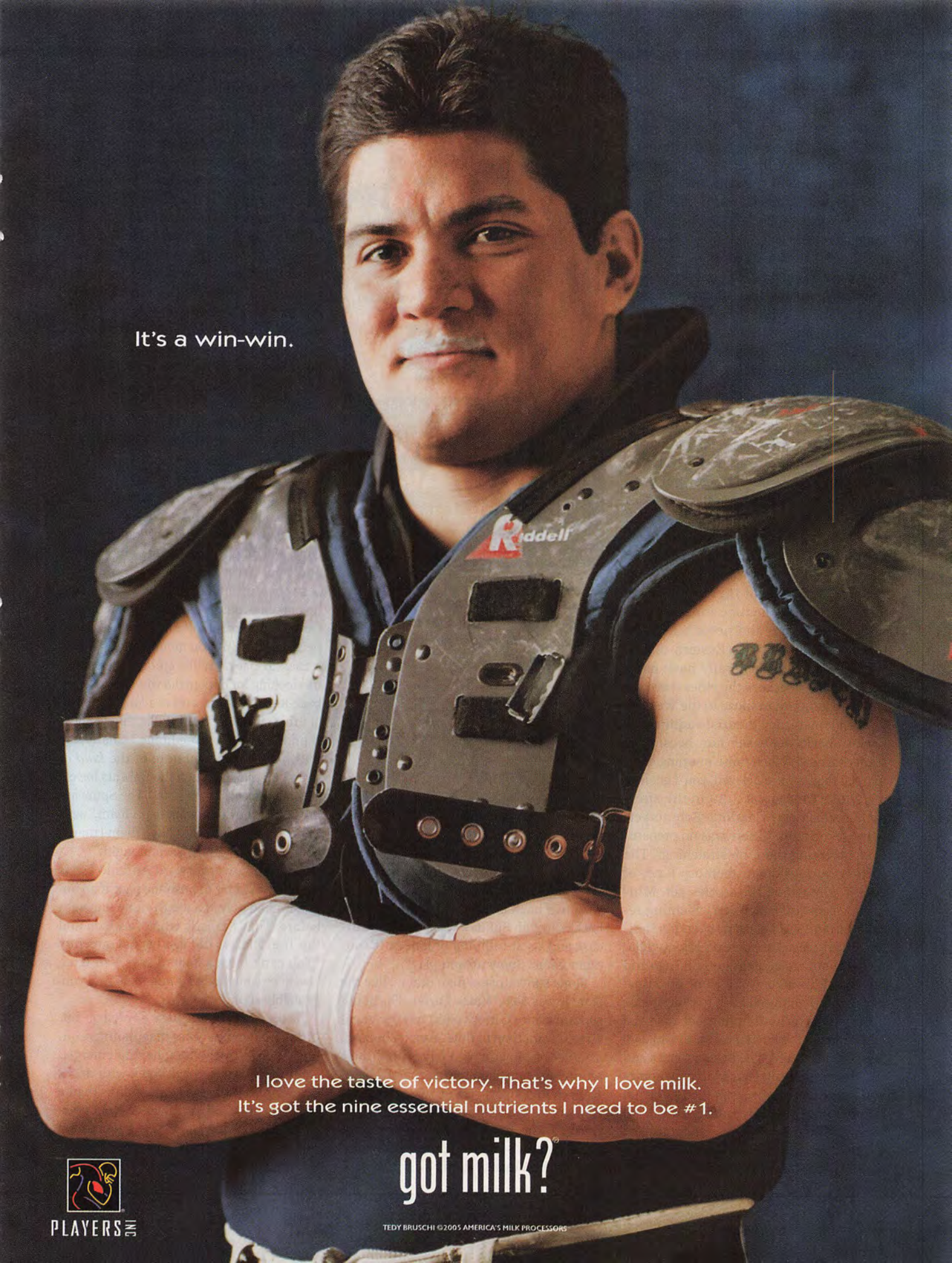
PLAYER	PPG Since '03–04	PPG in 2nd of B-to-B	Point Differential
RASHARD LEWIS, *Sonics*	17.7	21.8	4.1
DONYELL MARSHALL, *Raptors*	12.8	15.9	3.1
NICK VAN EXEL, *Blazers*	11.4	13.9	2.5
ANDRE MILLER, *Nuggets*	14.0	16.5	2.5
CARLOS BOOZER, *Jazz*	16.1	18.4	2.3

THE WORST: Vince Carter

VINCE CARTER, *Raptors/Nets*	23.0	17.9	–5.1
LATRELL SPREWELL, *T-Wolves*	16.1	12.6	–3.5
CARMELO ANTHONY, *Nuggets*	21.5	18.2	–3.3
PEJA STOJAKOVIC, *Kings*	23.5	20.6	–2.9
GORDAN GIRICEK, *Jazz*	11.3	8.6	–2.7

SOURCE: ELIAS SPORTS BUREAU

BRIAN BAHR/GETTY IMAGES (LEWIS); JEFF ZELEVANSKY/ICON SMI (CARTER)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which is not only more than any other Western Conference team but also 12 more than the team with whom they share Staples Center, the Lakers. Isn't it hard enough being a Clipper without getting slapped around by the schedule?

The Dallas Mavericks, on the other hand, will have had 86 back-to-backs over the same span, the league's fewest. Is that a meaningful advantage for the Mavs? Absolutely, says one Western Conference general manager: "It's a question of competitive balance. Every team should play between 15 and 18. It's never going to be exact, but it should be close."

To be fair—one hates to bring fairness into a paranoia-laced discourse—NBA vice president of operations Matt Winick, the league's schedule maker for the last decade, does a reasonable job of distributing back-to-backs, considering he has to work schedules around tractor pulls, ice shows and rock concerts at the arenas, as well as around each team's desire to hold games on nights when crowds are likely to be large. He gives teams no more than 24 back-to-backs per season, while aiming for a minimum of 15; rarely sends a team more than one time zone away for the second game; and never schedules three games in a row. (Eastern teams, Winick concedes, generally have more back-to-backs because the cities there are closer together than those in the West.)

Even conspiracy theorists admit that back-to-backs are easier now because of team charters. "When those morning commercial flights were delayed, you'd get into a city like Chicago at 3:30 in the afternoon," remembers Charlotte Bobcats veteran Steve Smith. "There was no preparation, no eating right, no stretching." The further you go down memory lane, of course, the worse the stories get. Minnesota assistant coach Jerry Sichting recalls the 1983–84 season when his Indiana Pacers played at home on Friday night, took a commercial flight into Chicago and bused to Milwaukee for a game on Saturday night, then bused back to Chicago for a Sunday-afternoon game because the NHL Black Hawks had claim to Chicago Stadium that night. The Boston Celtics and the Baltimore Bullets used to play home-and-home back-to-backs in the 1950s that involved both teams' riding a train all night. "Today's back-to-backs are for wimps," says Orlando Magic vice president Pat Williams, who recalls the 1967–68 Chicago Bulls' playing five games in five nights in five cities.

"The whole back-to-back thing and how tough it is is very overstated," says coach Stan Van Gundy, whose Miami Heat had won five back ends of its eight back-to-backs through Sunday. "It becomes an excuse and a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's another game. Show up and play."

Some show up less than others, like the New Jersey Nets' Vince Carter. That's not shocking since Carter's effort has been denigrated from time to time, even by himself. The list of players who have lifted their scoring the most in the back end of a back-to-back has a surprise or two, including Raptors forward Donyell Marshall. But as Carter's Toronto teammate in many of those games, perhaps he needed to compensate for Vince's falloff.

Carter's weakness in back-to-backs has almost certainly been noted by the many coaches who study back-to-back performance. "There are definitely some alarming stats," says Bulls coach Scott Skiles, "but none that I want to make public, especially about my team." He must have shared them with his charges somewhere along the line: After losing the second game in their first four back-to-backs, the Bulls have now won four back-enders in a row. Skiles, like other coaches, will make concessions when confronted with a back-to-back: He never holds a morning shootaround on the second day of a back-to-back; he substitutes more freely in the first half of the first game of the set; he removes key players more quickly in a blowout. But there are limits. "You rest guys on the first night and end up losing that game just so you can have them fresh to maybe lose the second game?" says Adelman. "That doesn't make a lot of sense."

Though young players tend not to think much about back-to-backs—or anything else besides XBox—veterans look for every edge. Heeding the advice of Sam Mitchell and Doug West, his mentors on the Timberwolves when he broke in, Garnett said he makes a conscious effort to practice extremely hard on an off day between games because "it helps you mentally prepare for a back-to-back." Willis studies the schedule, looking for opponents who'll be playing back-to-backs at the end of a long road trip. "In that situation," said Willis, "they're just thinking about getting home." Charlotte's Smith makes careful note of the *kind* of team he's playing when the Bobcats have a second game in two nights. "The Spurs are great, but they're a walk-it-up team," says Smith, "so you'd rather have them [than a running team] on the second night."

Chicago power forward Antonio Davis says he would try to push the pace if an opponent had played a tough game the night before. That's exactly what Van Exel and the Trail Blazers did against Sacramento. "You can't have a heart," says Van Exel, "because somebody's going to do it to you. Probably soon."

As the Kings left the Rose Garden on Saturday night, they were disappointed but not crushed by the loss, having emerged from their back-to-back week with a 2–2 record. And there are worse things than a heavy menu of games. "Back-to-back practices," said Miller, "now *there's* something that's bad. Fortunately, with this schedule we don't get many of those." □

LAST LEGS Bibby was wobbly in Round 2.

Home and (Blown) Away

All back-to-backs are not created equal. Here's a breakdown of the degrees of difficulty

At week's end this is how teams had fared in the second of back-to-back games since 2000–01. By comparison, overall winning percentage at home was .609, on the road .391.

	W	L	Pct.
ROAD-HOME	476	326	.594
HOME-HOME	36	30	.545
ROAD-ROAD	359	634	.362
HOME-ROAD	302	552	.354

*SOURCE: ELIAS SPORTS BUREAU

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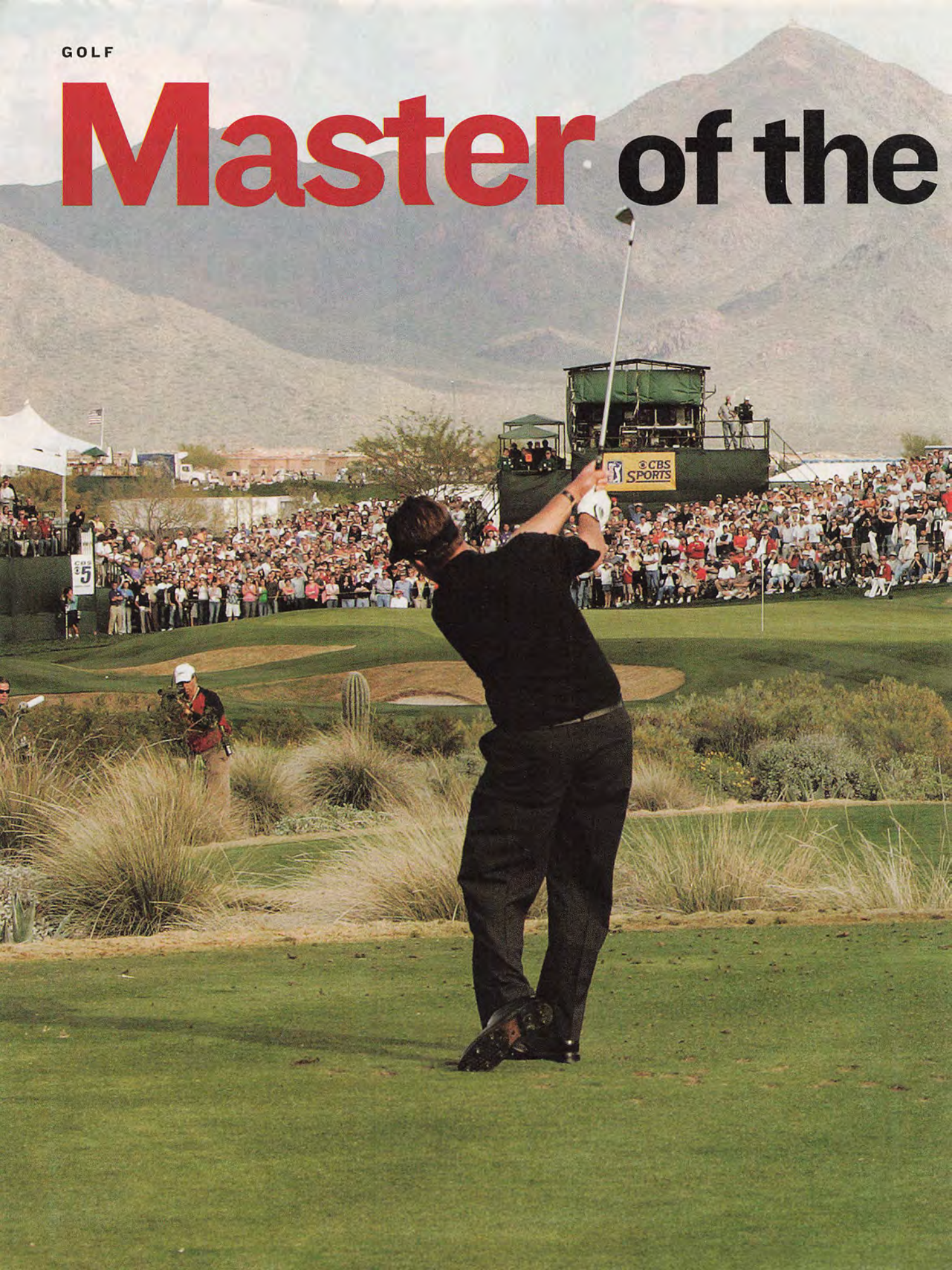

Masses

Cheered on by the largest crowds in Tour history, people's choice Phil Mickelson showed why he will also be a force in 2005 at the FBR Open

BY GARY VAN SICKLE

Photograph by Nick Doan/ICON SMI

MATT YORK/AP

LAST SATURDAY night FBR Open leader Phil Mickelson and his wife, Amy, ordered room service at the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess resort and spa in Scottsdale, Ariz., and made plans to go for a workout and then play with their three small children after dinner. The plan changed when the Mickelsons, channel surfing, stumbled on a rebroadcast of last year's Masters. Instead of going to the gym, they watched Phil win the Masters *again*, reliving those delicious moments from last April. "It never gets old," said Amy as she followed her man around the TPC of Scottsdale the next day. ¶ Winning *anything* on the PGA Tour never gets old, which is good, because her husband now has 24 Tour victories. He put away the erstwhile Phoenix Open in style, accidentally holing a 26-foot putt for birdie on the 72nd hole. The roar that followed was so loud and so sustained that even back on the clubhouse veranda everyone knew who had done what. "I guess Phil birdied 18," said fellow pro Steve Flesch, straining to make himself heard over the din. ¶ If navy is the new black, then Phil is the new Arnie—beloved (unlike Tiger, who is respected

CROWD PLEASER Mickelson, who capped a five-shot win with a birdie on the final hole (inset), dazzled the record galleries at the TPC of Scottsdale, including the 9,000 fans who ringed the Funhouse, the par-3 16th hole.

and feared and exciting, win or lose. Mickelson officially became America's Sweetheart at the 2002 U.S. Open, during which the fans at Bethpage made him the sentimental favorite because of his then 0-for-40 record in the majors. But Phil-watching has long been a popular pastime in Phoenix, where Mickelson was a college star at Arizona State and a resident until three years ago, when he moved to his hometown, San Diego. Plus, there are a heck of lot more fans at the FBR than at any Open. Last week an estimated 517,847 people, including a Tour-record 165,168 on Saturday, swarmed over the TPC of Scottsdale.

About 9,000 of those fans showed Mickelson some special love at the Funhouse, the raucous 162-yard 16th hole that is ringed by grandstands, skyboxes and spectator mounds *(box, page 59)*. One group of fans hung a banner over the railing of the grandstand that read THE HOUSE THAT PHIL BUILT. Five college students were more creative, every day donning green jackets as a way to pay homage to Phil's Masters victory. (The five Minnesota refugees showed the depth of their love on Saturday by wearing the coats over purple-and-white Vikings jerseys. One of them, Mike Leonard, also wore a black fright wig with his number 84 Randy Moss jersey, providing a scary glimpse of the future if Moss should ever win a Masters.) The group, which has held a reunion of sorts at 16 for the past few years, bombarded players with chants as innocuous as "Tip your hat! Tip your hat!" and as biting as "One more club! One more club!" after Len Mattiace hit a shot that landed in the front bunker. They worked up their material with the help of a tip sheet of background info on the players. Hot items on this year's sheet: Aaron Baddeley has a dog named Brutus, Briny Baird's real first name is Michael, and Fredrik Jacobson once was a nationally ranked table-tennis player in Sweden. The four pages of data were compiled by Leonard, a student at Gustavus Adolphus, but he and his cronies didn't need any Tour trivia to prep for Mickelson.

"As soon as Phil won the Masters," said Ashley Plumb, an Arizona State student from suburban Minneapolis, "Mike and I called each other and said, 'We've got to get green jackets for Phoenix next year.' "

Mickelson spotted them in the coats during the first round. "He went nuts," Plumb said. "He took his hat off and was smiling, laughing and pointing. It was great."

BY MICKELSON'S count, he came within five strokes of winning the Grand Slam in 2004. He was second by two shots in the U.S. Open, missed a playoff at the British Open by one and was a couple of strokes shy of the PGA Championship playoff. Then he famously flamed out at September's Ryder Cup, during which he lost two matches while paired with his nemesis, Woods. Mickelson was widely criticized for changing equipment only two weeks before the event, so it had to qualify as irony that he won in Phoenix with yet another bag of brand new sticks plus a new ball, all made by Callaway. Last year Mickelson lost 10.6 yards off the tee, going from a 306.0-yard driving average to 295.4 as he attempted to play a more controlled game. He says he has regained those lost yards, with no loss of control, with his new titanium driver. For the week Mickelson hit 60.7% of the fairways, ranking only 51st in the field, but when he did find the short grass, he was deadly. From the 34 fairways he hit, he made 18 of his 23 birdies.

In November, Mickelson shot a 59 while winning the Grand Slam of Golf, a made-for-TV event featuring the winners of the year's majors. He spent the short off-season working on a book with Amy, *One Magical Sunday (But Winning Isn't Everything)*, a collection of golf stories and recollections intertwined with a look back at the final round of the '04 Masters. "[The book] was difficult, time-consuming and a lot harder than I thought," Mickelson says, "so I wasn't quite as sharp in San Diego." (Mickelson finished 56th at the Buick Invitational, his first start this year.)

He also looked sluggish opening the FBR. He missed the first six fairways, shot four over par on the opening nine and appeared likely to miss the cut on a bizarre day when play was stopped for a half hour due to 36-mph winds that pushed balls all over the TPC of Scottsdale's slick greens. Two late birdies helped him salvage a two-over-par 73—the highest first-round score by a Phoenix winner since 1944. The next

MATT YORK/AP

ESCAPE ARTIST Mickelson began spraying his tee shots on Sunday but prevailed with some miraculous recoveries, like this one on 5.

Welcome to the Funhouse

Anything (almost) goes at the coolest little hole in golf, the 16th at the TPC of Scottsdale

THE VOLUME SEEMED MUTED last Saturday at the Funhouse—a.k.a. the 162-yard 16th hole at the TPC of Scottsdale—and I was beginning to wonder if the par-3 was no longer the loudest, coolest hole on the PGA Tour. As usual, the 9,000 or so fans were there, filling the skyboxes flanking the right side of the hole, the grandstands on the left and the large spectator mound to the right of the green. But something was wrong. At the tunnellike entrance to the tee, where emerging players used to be greeted by a thunderous roar, only a handful of college kids chanted "L-S-U! L-S-U!" at die-hard Tigers fan David Toms. In years past every tee shot was followed by a deafening "Go in the hole!" Not on Saturday. The Funhouse, I feared, had lost its groove.

Soon it became apparent why. The public grandstands adjacent to the tee had been moved 35 yards down the fairway, replaced with more sedate corporate boxes by the Thunderbirds, the group that puts on the FBR Open. Also, armed police stood in the front row of the grandstands facing potential troublemakers. As an added measure, a voice on the public-address system announced, "Quiet on the tee, please!" as each pro got ready to play his shot. "That really works," said a pleased Jock Holliman, the Thunderbird in charge of 16.

Holliman explained the challenge of keeping the lid on 16. "See that kid in the green cap?" he said, pointing to a young man holding a dozen neatly stacked plastic cups. "That's how many beers he's had." Security had removed three fans earlier in the afternoon, and since then, he added, "everything has been calm." The show of force was partially in response to a pair of incidents the day before. When John Daly's threesome showed up sans JD—he had WD'd after a first-round 81—the grandstanders chanted, "Where is Daly? [Clap, clap, clap-clap-clap!] He's out drinking! [Clap, clap, clap-clap-clap!]" The Thunderbirds thought that chant, as well as the one that went up for world No. 1 Vijay Singh—"Who's your cad-die? [Clap, clap, clap-clap-clap!]"—was over the top.

On Saturday the 16th didn't really come to life until Phil Mickelson popped out of the tunnel and was greeted—like old times—with an explosion of sound. Mickelson grinned his goofy grin as he drank in the scene. When he hit his tee shot there was a another thunderclap of noise. When he sank a lengthy par-saving putt minutes later, there was an even louder cascade of sound, if that was possible. The Funhouse, I was reassured, is still the loudest, coolest hole on Tour. —G.V.S.

BIG PICTURE Organizers love the spectacle that is the 16th but added security on Saturday to keep a lid on the frivolity.

day, in calm conditions, he birdied the last five holes to shoot 60, his career low on Tour, and tie 21-year-old Kevin Na for the lead. The highlight came when Mickelson drove the green at the 332-yard, par-4 17th, then holed what he estimated to be a 95-foot putt for eagle. (The Tour said the putt was 77 feet long, but either way. . . .) A third-round 66 gave Mickelson a four-shot lead, and while no one got closer than three on Sunday, he made things exciting by spraying tee shots so far off-line that he had to go on safari before brilliantly scrambling to save pars. The cognoscenti are still marveling about how Woods won without his best stuff last month at the Buick Invitational. Mickelson did the same at the FBR. He struggled mightily coming in, hitting only one of the last seven fairways and three of the final nine greens, yet he shot a two-under 34 on the back side to cap a 68 and win by a personal-best five strokes.

The round was filled with Arnie-like recoveries that made for must-see TV. At the 5th hole, a 453-yard par-4, Mickelson hooked an impossible wedge approach off a junky lie over some trees to within 75 feet of the hole, then nearly made the birdie putt. At the par-5 13th he hit his tee shot under some trees in a waste area, but he rifled a five-iron just short of the green and got up and down for a birdie. At the par-5 15th his drive bled into the water hazard guarding the left side of the fairway. After taking a drop, Mickelson hit a dangerous four-iron that landed just short of the island green, then got up and down to save par. "I thought, Oh, c'mon, isn't this guy ever going to make a mistake?" said Na, who tied for second with Scott McCarron.

Mickelson's win portends great things for the 2005 season. Three of the first five tournaments have been won by the first-, second- and fourth-ranked players in the world: Vijay Singh (Sony Open), Woods (Buick) and now Mickelson, respectively. "Golf is becoming so unpredictable," says Brandel Chamblee, a former Tour player who is an analyst for the Golf Channel. "Now we have five guys—I include Number 3 Ernie Els and Number 5 Retief Goosen—who play well every week. It's great for golf and great for the tournaments. Now an event isn't seen as a failure if it doesn't have Tiger in the field."

Mickelson surely inspires the masses. Maybe it's the semipermanent smile that makes him endearing, or maybe it's the long drives and the sensational recoveries. It could be his history of close calls that makes the rest of us relate. Whatever the reason, we are a nation of Phil-watchers. And as his up-and-down performance in Phoenix made clear again, that never gets old. □

DARREN CARROLL (2)

It's All Down

Though he didn't have as much fun flying on two skis as he did on one, incomparable **Bode Miller** led a historic one-two U.S. finish at the world championships

BY TIM LAYDEN

Photograph by Simon Bruty

hill for Bode

BODE MILLER spread his arms wide and then raised them skyward, accepting adulation and smiling like a man living a boy's dream. Last Saturday evening an ancient cobblestone square in the Italian ski town of Bormio was bathed in spotlights and overrun with spectators, who deliriously crammed between buildings to watch the medal ceremony for the men's downhill race at the Alpine World Ski Championships. Many chanted the familiar Bo-dee! Bo-dee! Bo-dee! Miller's teammate, Daron Rahlves, stood on the second-place platform and at the head of the crowd, U.S. speed coach John McBride wrapped himself in an American flag as if it were a warm blanket. A gold medal hung from Miller's neck, and the ski racing world lay at his feet.

THOMAS KIENZLE/AP

BOTTOMS UP After the downhill Miller (3, and above on left) and Rahlves were the toast of Bormio.

Seven hours earlier the 27-year-old Miller had crushed the best ski racers in the world on Bormio's Stelvio downhill course, a gnarly, twisting beast that begins high above the timber line and ends on a steep hillside overlooking the gentle Frodolfo river that divides the center of Bormio. "Another stellar performance for the big man," said British downhiller Finlay Mickel, who finished 11th. "The legend grows."

And grows. And grows. And grows. Miller's downhill medal was his second gold at this year's worlds (he won the Super G on Jan. 29), the first world championship downhill gold for a U.S. male and the first gold for an American male in any championship downhill since Tommy Moe won a surprise Olympic gold in 1994. Rahlves's silver medal—he was a distant .44 of a second back, and bronze medalist Michael Walchhofer of Austria was .43 behind Rahlves—gave the U.S. its first one-two finish in any Olympic or world championship downhill. "One-two in a world championship downhill is an awesome achievement," said Miller. "Never mind me, personally."

Let's mind him just the same. His downhill gold came at the end of a remarkable three days during which Miller displayed all the talent, joy and contrarian's creativity that come with being Bode.

On Thursday morning, in the downhill portion of the three-run downhill-slalom-combined event, Miller lost his left ski 15 seconds into the run. Then, to the delight of the crowd watching on a big screen at the bottom of the hill, he skied for roughly 90 seconds—over more than a mile of brutal terrain—on one seven-foot-long downhill ski made for speed, not for turning or balance. "There aren't many skiers in the world who could do what he did today," said former U.S. Ski Team coach Bob Beattie.

"I could do it," said Norwegian racer Aksel

Lund Svindal, "but not as easy as he did."

Technically, the one-ski act was pointless. Miller said he was hoping to stay upright through the finish (he fell on his butt roughly 45 seconds short) so that he could ski the combined slaloms later in the day, but he was disqualified as soon as he passed a gate without two skis. Artistically, however, the show was a hit. International Ski Federation (FIS) men's World Cup race director Gunter Hujara did not wave Miller off the course and would not have fined him for finishing, because, he said, "this little show . . . was a good thing."

Miller was inundated with phone messages and e-mails. "One coach on the East Coast said, 'Bode, I'm having all my racers go up and ski on one ski this week, hoping that someday they can be just like you,' " Miller said, laughing. "I'm like, 'Guys, I DNF'd the race!' "

Miller has always relished the thrill of the moment. He lives for the rush of skiing expertly over simply winning medals, the fun of a long night drinking beers over the safety of a clear head in the morning. Skiing on one ski was no different. "You have to enjoy skiing," Miller said two days later, standing in a frozen field outside the RV that he calls home during the long, European portion of the World Cup season. "It was pretty damn fun to ski a tough downhill course on one ski, regardless of the results. It was just fun."

On Friday, the last day of official training for the downhill, Miller was again working outside the box. FIS rules dictate that the starting order for the race be determined by inverting the results of the last day of training; the fastest qualifier starts 30th, the slowest among the first 30 qualifiers starts first. The purpose is to create race suspense by having the fastest racers start late. (Qualifiers out of the top 30 start from positions 31 and higher.)

WIPEOUT After losing her balance in a training run, up-and-comer Kildow just missed medals in the combined and downhill.

Some skiers, however, manipulate the system by slowing near the finish in hopes of starting earlier. Miller wanted to start the Bormio downhill as early as possible. "For the early starters the visibility is bad, but the snow conditions are perfect," Miller said. "Later, the visibility is better, but the snow is chopped up. I'm so high on the edges of my skis that I pay a higher price in bad snow, but I see pretty well in bad light."

In a bid for a slow qualifying time, which would give him an early start, Miller chose to stand in the start house, activate the timing wand with his pole and count *one thousand one, one thousand two* before heading down the hill, in effect adding two seconds to his time. The result was a 28th-place finish in training that left him starting at a near-perfect No. 3. Had he been slightly slower, he would have slipped to a deadly No. 31 start or worse. "I've been messing around with opening the wand for a while," Miller said. "It never worked as perfectly as it did here. I was right on the edge. That was as big a factor as anything I did in the race."

What he did in the race was carve a hard, fast line on clean snow, but he so badly burned out his legs that he staggered through the final three turns on memory, finishing in 1:56.22. "I didn't think the time would hold up," Miller said. "I figured somebody would have a solid run and knock me down."

Only Rahlves came within a half second. One week earlier, still sore from a horrible Jan. 11 crash in a giant slalom race in Adelboden, Switzerland, and uncomfortable skiing on the soft Bormio snow (he is better on hard, icy snow), Rahlves finished a disappointing 10th in the world championship Super G, the event that he won in 2001. He went back to his custom-made bus and watched surfing videos—"A good way to get in the flow," he said—and stopped taking Mobic, the Vioxx-like painkiller he needed for "internal trauma" in his lower left leg.

On Saturday, Rahlves made only small mistakes on a jump early in the run and on a series of turns in the middle. Like Miller, he was subdued in the finish corral, until each of the five Austrians who followed—including the fading Hermann Maier, who finished 17th—were at the bottom. Then Miller and Rahlves sprayed each other with champagne. For Rahlves, 21, there was only a small element of the bittersweet, much like when he finished second behind Miller by .16 of a second in a World Cup downhill on Dec. 3 at Beaver Creek, Colo. "It's no problem," Rahlves said. "*This* is all cool."

Cooler than it turned out for Lindsey Kildow, 20, who arrived at the world championships as the breakout star of the U.S. women's team with a World Cup downhill victory in December and 10 top 10 finishes. "I want to medal here, go to the Olympics, then try for the overall [World Cup]," Kildow said before the worlds began. She finished a disappointing ninth in the first weekend's Super G but then skied terrifically in the combined and the downhill, only to finish fourth in each, missing two bronze medals by a total of less than half a second. She was scheduled to ski the giant slalom on Tuesday.

Over the first nine days in Bormio, Kildow candidly admitted being overwhelmed by her sudden place in the spotlight, but on Sunday she vowed through tears to train harder and be more prepared for the Olympics, 12 months away. "This race is going to be forever in my mind," Kildow said after the downhill. "I guess maybe my time is next year."

Miller doesn't guess. He knows. He will race the giant slalom and slalom this week in Bormio, then try to win the World Cup overall title—all en route to potentially becoming the U.S. Olympic face of 2006, the Michael Phelps of the Winter Games in Turin. "It'll feel big, I know that," Miller said on Saturday, walking near the finish stadium. As if on cue, a blast of wind stiffened a huge promotional banner. On it were four letters: BODE. □

MIRKO GUARIELLO/EPA

Downhill Wonders

Bode Miller's victory in the downhill last week was only the fifth in that event by a U.S. skier in world championship or Olympic competition. Here are the other four Americans to accomplish the feat.

NAME	YEAR	EVENT
Bill Johnson	*1984*	Sarajevo Olympics
Tommy Moe	*1994*	Lillehammer Olympics
Picabo Street	*1996*	Worlds (Spain)
Hilary Lindh	*1997*	Worlds (Italy)

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MEL LEVINE (FRAME)

Wisconsin Pride

Meet the Dieners of Fond du Lac, the first family of heartland hoops—three generations that have shot and smiled through stardom and sorrow

BY CHARLES P. PIERCE

Photograph by Michael J. LeBrecht II/1DEUCE3 PHOTOGRAPHY

Promise Yourself—To be too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of trouble.

—THE OPTIMISTS CREED, 1922

THE OPTIMIST DIED YOUNG, so it's his widow who comes to watch the grandchildren play. She watched them all grow up, the sons and daughters and now the grandchildren the Optimist never knew. "Be too large for worry," he used to say, but he missed all this, and so she misses him with every shot made, every point scored and every note the pep band plays. ¶ Tonight she's tucked into the corner of the Allstate Arena out on the far O'Hare fringes of Chicagoland. One of her sons sits three seats over. One of *his* sons is playing for the DePaul Blue Demons, and another is helping coach them. Somewhere in this arena is another of her sons, fussing and fuming, she is sure, and one of *his* sons is playing for the Marquette Golden Eagles, who are having a bad time of it against DePaul. She's sort of rooting for the Blue Demons because she's sitting with the son

The Old Hoopstead For more than half a century June has overseen the Marr Street driveway tussles that now feature grandkids (from left) Travis, Rachel, Brittney and Drake.

whose son is playing for DePaul, but she's rooting too for the skinny kid in the blue-and-gold uniform with the swagger in his step and the beard that is largely wishful thinking, the little squirt who used to career around her driveway and her living room and her kitchen and much of the greater metropolitan area of Fond du Lac, Wis.

Travis Diener has been the central part of a four-year revival of the basketball program at Marquette. A 6' 1", 175-pound point guard, he was averaging 20.0 points through Sunday—22nd in the nation—and 6.8 assists, and was closing in on the school's all-time scoring record, which has stood for 35 years. He is one of 30 finalists for the Wooden Award, presented to the nation's best college player, and one of 18 finalists for the Cousy Award, given to the nation's top point guard. Two years ago Diener and Dwyane Wade, currently in Miami d/b/a the anti-Kobe, led Marquette to the Final Four for the first time since Al McGuire's team won it all in 1977. It was Diener's 29 points that saved that team from what would have been an embarrassing first-round loss to Holy Cross.

"I think we play intelligently and unselfishly," says Drake. "Where does Travis fall in the PECKING ORDER? It's hard not to say he's on top."

"It's gone by so fast," he muses. "It just seems like I just set foot on campus, just got done playing high school basketball with my uncle coaching me, and now I'm two months away from it all being over."

Diener began at Marquette as a weapon off the bench, a deadly three-point shooter used by coach Tom Crean to shake up the game. (At week's end he was shooting a gaudy 43.9% this season from beyond the arc.) Now, though, he's become a versatile player of startling intelligence—"His basketball IQ," says Marquette forward Steve Novak, "is off the charts"—and surpassing toughness.

Travis Diener's talking all the time, chewing on his teammates and chatting up referees from baseline to baseline, and occasionally even having a word for the fans, who get on him in arenas around the country the way that the fans once did in all those icebox gyms in the Fox Valley Association, where they'd taunt him with speculation that the Dieners all married each other. In short, as it were, Travis Diener plays the game in such a way as to make Duke's cocky J.J. Redick look as 'umble as Uriah Heep.

"You have to be like that, if you're my size," Travis explains. "If you're not, the people at this level will just eat you alive. You'll be done."

"He always was a cocky little s---," his father, Bob, says, admiringly, and that's how to distinguish Travis from all the other Dieners. After that, it's best to line them up all at once. If you don't, you can get lost in the Dieners and never find your way out.

There's Travis, who'll be 23 on March 1, and his two younger sisters, Rachel and Brittney, both of whom play college basketball—Rachel at Saint Louis University and Brittney at Lewis in Illinois. That's the easy part. Now this is where the whole thing starts to go all Plantagenet on us.

Bob Diener owns the Press Box, a cozy saloon along the Fond du Lac River to which people occasionally drive their snowmobiles. He does not coach. He is the excitable one.

"He could have been a coach," says Drew Diener, one of his nephews, "except he'd get thrown out of every game. When Travis plays, ESPN ought to just have a camera on him. You know: Bob-cam."

Bob's brother Dick actually *is* the longtime coach at Fond du Lac High. Dick coached Travis. He also coached his own sons, Drake, 23, and Drew, 25. Drake Diener plays for DePaul, at which Drew, who played at Saint Louis, is now a graduate assistant. At one time Dick Diener had four Dieners on the floor at once, two of his sons and two of his nephews—Travis and his cousin Dallas.

Shootin' Match A touted backcourt tandem in high school, Drake (left) and Travis now are fierce rivals.

And this is not to mention Bob and Dick's brother (and Dallas's father) Jim, who is the painting-business millionaire and the family golfer, or their other brother, Tom, who coaches at Vincent High in Milwaukee and who last season put a serious whipping on Dick's team in the quarterfinals of the Wisconsin state tournament. Their mother went to that game, and she didn't like having to pick between them, but she sort of rooted for Fond du Lac because that's where she lives.

She's had much to cheer about. She has all the basketball players, of course, two generations of them, and Dallas won the 2000 state high school golf championship, and Rachel and Brittney were also all-state tennis players. And she has her daughter, Cathy, who was Miss Fond du Lac in 1973. Involvement was what the Optimist was all about, involvement and excellence, back when they were first married.

"They're determined," she says. "I think that comes from my husband. He always said, 'Give it all you've got, and then give it a little more.' "

Out on the court her grandson Drake drains a long jump shot and runs down the court with three fingers in the air on each hand, which is something Travis has been known to do. Drake is taller than his cousin, a 6' 5" shooting guard and one of DePaul's captains. At week's end he was averaging 11.5 points, shooting a stellar 41.2% from beyond the arc and 89.6% from the line. "I think you see the same thing in all of us, in our play," Drake would say after his team's 85–72 win, in which he scored 12 points and handed out five assists. (Travis finished with 15

MANNY MILLAN (2)

and nine, respectively.) "I think we play intelligently and unselfishly. Where does Travis fall in the pecking order? It's hard not to say he's on top."

"They're all basketball purists," says Dave Leitao, Drake's coach at DePaul, whose team will face Marquette again on Feb. 20, in Milwaukee. "They eat, sleep and breathe the game like coaches do." And, it must be said, like grandmothers do too.

The Optimist's wife looks at Travis, and she remembers him battling his bigger cousins for the basketball under the hoop that's hung on her garage for three generations now. She cuts his hair. She cuts all their hair, her children's and their children's, and even *their* children's now. She cuts their hair, and she watches them play, and it hurts her to see how much the Optimist missed.

"I don't know how it happened," she says. "But I never go out of the house now, I never go to the grocery store, where somebody doesn't say, 'Hey, you're Gramma Diener.' I really kind of enjoy it, and I'm very proud."

Travis is driving down the big court now, on national television, playing against his cousin and playing that same way he always has, fighting almost recklessly on a bad ankle while his team is coming apart around him. Eighty-two-year-old June Diener sits back down, and she thinks about how much the Optimist would have loved all this. He missed it all, and so she misses him, the way she always will, because the Optimist died too soon. Pictures of the entire clan hang in her dining room back home. Shadows fill the spaces in between.

Family Trade As budding college guards, Brittney (left) and Rachel are clearly cut from the Diener cloth.

THE PASTURES roll in great, spreading swells, and the county roads run through them like bent wire. There's ice on the fence posts, and hawks stand silent sentinel atop the barren trees. Up toward Lake Winnebago, where Fond du Lac is, winter can look vast and permanent, as though nothing ever changes, as though the hawks have stood there in the crooked branches, unblinking in the wind and as still as cold iron, since the 1840s, when the revolution collapsed in Germany and its unruly sons and daughters fled to places like this to build new lives on the farms and in the mills and Fond du Lac found itself suddenly a city.

The Germans prospered, and their revolutionary ardor faded through the years. They became more American than a lot of Americans seemed to be. "It's a very conservative place," says Wisconsin attorney general Peggy Lautenschlager, a Democrat and a Fond du Lac native. "It's very Republican, very German and very Catholic."

June Kramer grew up on a farm eight miles outside town. In 1940 she finished high school and, some time during the following summer, a man came out to the farm and offered her a chance to go to beauticians' school down in Milwaukee, 55 miles away.

"I'd never been out of the county," she recalls. "I'd never been on a bus before, and I'd certainly never been to a big city."

So she rode the bus, pop-eyed, as the county roads gave way to the boulevards and avenues of the city. She lodged with some people who worked her to the bone for her room and board. "That was a disaster," she says. But she stuck it out and got her license. Then she went home.

There she met Lyle Diener, a bluff, spirited man who ran a milk distributorship. He was a former B-17 pilot who'd flown 62 missions over Europe during the war, very few of which were, well, milk runs. He'd come back to Fond du Lac, started his business with two other fellows and cofounded the local branch of the Optimists Club, one of those national fraternal outfits dedicated to good works in the communities in which they'd established themselves.

"Girls or boys, it didn't matter," recalls Rachel of the family's driveway games. "If you went out there, you had to PLAY FOR REAL."

Optimists agreed, among other things, "to wear a cheerful countenance at all times and give every living creature you meet a smile," which, to Lyle, had been an instinct long before it was a creed. He would have been an Optimist even without a club.

(How optimistic the Optimists are can best be measured by the fact that the organization is still thriving after almost a century; Peg Lautenschlager specifically mentions her membership in the Fond du Lac Optimists on her political CV. That their optimism remains unflagging can best be measured by the fact that last year the national organization opened a chapter in Baghdad.)

There were almost 1,000 branches nationwide by the time Lyle Diener started his in Fond du Lac, all of them dedicated to promoting activities aimed at what was then called "the youth of the community." Lyle threw himself into these, and he threw the youth of his family into them as well.

"We did everything," recalls Bob Diener. "Boy Scouts, Indian Guides, you name it." The two oldest boys, Bob and Dick, also got dragooned into the local drum-and-bugle corps, which neither one of them remembers fondly. They were indifferent buglers. "Music," says Bob, "wasn't our bag."

But sports were. Lyle hung a basketball hoop on the garage of the house he and June had bought on Marr Street when they married, and Bob and Dick became good enough to play in high school for Fritz Lautenschlager, Peg's father. Bob broke both ankles playing football and never was quite right as an athlete again, but Dick became a star, the leading scorer in school history. He went away to college at Richmond but eventually transferred back home to nearby Lakeland College.

STEVE WOLTMANN (LEFT); DAVID W. PRESTON

By 1970 the three youngest children, Cathy, Jim and Tom, were the only ones left in the house on Marr Street. Bob had married and was living upstairs in the duplex next door. Dick came home from college to visit. In the middle of the night he heard his father get up to go to the bathroom. Then he heard his mother scream.

"What I remember," says Tom Diener, "is my mother, downstairs, shouting, 'Lyle! Lyle!' and Dick, trying to revive my dad, saying, 'Breathe! Breathe!' Dick's hollering at him. I can remember how long it seemed to take the ambulance to come. I was 12, and I can remember it like it was yesterday."

Lyle Diener died of a heart attack in his son's arms, on the floor of his house. He was 49. All of the Optimists came to his funeral.

OF ALL the kids, Tom missed his father the most. He was the youngest and had had the least time with him. He also was the last child living with his mother in a house that now seemed unfathomably large. "Bob and Dick helped out," says Tom. "But it was all my mom. She's a tough lady." Eventually Tom went to Wisconsin–Stout, and his mother was alone.

The Optimist Lyle bequeathed sports and smiles to his brood.

June had kept up her license, and she went back to work as a hairdresser. She also worked in a department store downtown. The grandkids had begun to arrive. Bob had two children already—Danny and Angie—but his marriage foundered, and the kids went to live across town with their mother. Meanwhile Dick and his wife, Sara, had Derek (now 27, and a former Army basketball player), Drew and Drake. Bob remarried, to a former runner named Vicki Julka, and they had a son, a skinny ball of fire named Travis, and then Rachel and Brittney. Everyone lived close by: Bob right around the corner and Dick eight blocks away. The hoop that Lyle had hung for his sons now became the center of the extended family's life.

"It would snow at night, and we'd go to church, and then they'd shovel it out," June recalls. "Sometimes they'd put rugs down on the driveway so they could play." June even put up an eight-foot hoop for the smaller kids.

"Girls or boys, it didn't matter," says Rachel. "If you went out there, you had to play for real."

All the cousins played, even Danny, Bob's son from his first marriage, whom Travis and his sisters came to look on as a big brother. "He was the one who drove us to all of our games," recalls Brittney. "Danny was one of us."

Gradually Travis began to assert himself in the games. He was short and impossibly slender, but he was developing a formidable shooting range and he simply never stopped moving. "He's confident because he's worked so darn hard," says his uncle Tom, "and he's always been an underdog."

By the time Travis was ready for high school, Bob and Vicki decided to hold him out for a year, at least partly so he could physically mature. As is often the case in small towns, there were people in Fond du Lac who were upset by this, and in a neighborhood spitting match that somehow found its way into the local newspaper, Bob and Vicki (and Dick and Sara, who also held Drake out) found themselves cast as the worst kind of sports parents.

"I think, more so in a small town, you get jealousies like that," Travis muses. "You have to deal with it your whole life. I think if there was one thing in the world I could eliminate, it'd be jealousy, because there's no good that can come from it for anyone."

"If you'd have told us up front that it was going to be this kind of a hassle," says Bob, "we might have done something differently."

Playing for his Uncle Dick, Travis blossomed in high school, leading the Cardinals to a 22–2 record in his senior year. That same year Drake became the second-leading national high school free throw shooter of all time (making 96.3%), while Travis shot 80% from the line. The Cardinals were impossible to beat with a lead in the last few minutes of a game. "We had a free throw competition at the end of every practice," Dick Diener recalls. "Travis and Drake would go back and forth, [one of them winning] every day."

> "What I remember," says Tom Diener, "is my mother shouting, LYLE! LYLE!" and Dick, trying to revive my dad, saying, 'Breathe! Breathe!' "

There was talk that Travis would go to Wisconsin, but the Badgers' slowdown style under then coach Dick Bennett never interested him. "I have all the respect in the world for Dick Bennett," Travis says, "but I didn't think I'd fit. I wanted to go up and down [the court] more." So he signed with Marquette, and with Crean, a former assistant at Michigan State, whose up-tempo team had won the 2000 national title. In 2001, like his grandmother before him, Travis Diener left Fond du Lac on the road to Milwaukee.

He was there a week when he called home one night. His parents asked him to call back in two minutes. When he did, his mother was crying.

There had been problems for a while with Danny, Bob's son from his first marriage. He drank too much, and he got into cocaine, and everybody in town seemed to know it. He lived with June for a couple of years and then moved into a house on Sheboygan Street, next door to Peg Lautenschlager.

For a while Danny had seemed to be turning the corner. He'd gone into a rehabilitation clinic for 60 days, and he'd been clean since he got out. But an engagement had been broken off, and a couple of friends invited him to go to a Monday night football game in Green Bay, and there had been some beers and then, apparently, a lot of cocaine. Out her window Peg Lautenschlager saw the red lights of the police car in front of the house next door. They brought Danny out on a stretcher. He'd overdosed, fatally, sometime during the night.

"He was a great guy," says Tom Diener. "That's why there were so many people crying at his funeral."

Tom Crean brought nearly the entire Marquette basketball program, right down to the office staff, up to Danny's wake. When Travis returned to school afterward, the team enfolded him. He grew very close to Wade, whose talents were exploding. The two roomed together on the road. Travis also discovered that his teammates gravitated toward him for leadership, and that helped him too. After all, it is in the Optimist's Creed that you should "make all your friends feel that there is something in them."

"Travis truly has a love for people, and not just his teammates but anyone he runs into," Wade says. "People attach themselves to him, and he attaches himself to them."

From the other side of Milwaukee at inner-city Vincent High,

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where he had come to coach as a kind of strange amalgam of Gene Hackman's Norman Dale and Ken Howard's White Shadow, Tom Diener visited Marquette's practices a couple of times a week, just to check on Travis.

"I still can't talk about [Danny's death] without tearing up," Tom says. "It's still so fresh. I cried. I still cry. I was going over to practice every couple of days, and I usually try to stay away. I tried to talk to Travis about it a little, but he didn't talk about it much."

"It devastated me," Travis recalls. "It was definitely the worst few weeks or months of my life. He was like an older brother, you know? Like an *older* older brother. Ask any college freshman: It's the hardest year of your life anyway, just getting adjusted. And this was right in the first few weeks of school."

You can feel it again, deep within both of them, as you feel it in June when she talks about her husband. The family talks about sudden death in the night as though it were part of a shared emotional cosmology, as cold and solid in them as whatever it is that makes hawks look like iron in the winter, unbending in the empty trees.

TRAVIS DIENER has made a play that was so smart and so quick it bordered on a kind of grand illusion, as though both benches, all three referees and the several-thousand-odd fans who had braved a fine Milwaukee blizzard to come drifting into the Bradley Center had suddenly seen him wave a cape and make an elephant appear atop the backboard.

With 5:23 left in a game that Marquette was losing to Charlotte 63–57, Diener had been fouled and gone to the line. On the

The Extended Family Only Tom (son of Ruth and Lyle) was absent at a recent gathering of the Diener clan in Fond du Lac.

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II/DEUCE3 PHOTOGRAPHY; MEL LEVINE (FRAME)

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HONDA

way he noticed that Marquette was not yet in the bonus situation. Uncharacteristically—Diener has shot 83.8% from the line in his college career—he missed his free throw, which rebounded into the hands of Charlotte forward Curtis Withers. As everyone else on the floor stood around the lane in anticipation of a second free throw attempt, Diener was the only one who grasped the situation. He bolted for the basket, snatched the ball from the astounded Withers and dropped in a layup.

It took the crowd a couple of seconds to cheer. Charlotte coach Bobby Lutz was caught so flat-footed that he didn't even argue, much. Up in the stands Bob and Vicki thought Travis was so angry at having missed from the line that, having grabbed the ball, he was going to do something crazy, like throw it into the seats.

The referees caucused earnestly at midcourt, and even Tom Crean didn't seem to fully comprehend the situation until the ref signaled that the basket was good, and the arena erupted. At the bench Steve Novak gave Diener a high five.

"I told him, 'Thanks for making the rest of us look like schlubs,' " Novak says.

"None of us heard the [one-and-one] call except him," Crean says. "It goes to show you what his mind is like. You can't put a price tag on his intellect on the floor."

"He's not your stereotypical coach's kid," Charlotte's Lutz says of Travis. "Some of them are as smart as him, but they're not as talented. He's smart, and he can play. He's a great player and a great thinker. He looks a little hurt now, though."

Indeed, Travis's final college season turned unkind on him as Marquette rounded the corner into conference play. He sprained his left foot badly during the landfill that was Marquette's nonconference schedule, and the injury was eventually diagnosed as a stress fracture. The Golden Eagles lost to DePaul and then to Charlotte, despite Diener's heads-up play, and to see him laboring is to see half of what he is. His game is now one of small loops and arcs, not straight lines and sharp angles, so he is much easier to guard. When Crean sat Diener on the road against Louisville, Marquette disintegrated entirely, losing by 47 points, the worst loss in the school's history. When an MRI later revealed a stress fracture, Travis sat out two more games. Last Saturday, however, with Marquette struggling, he came off the bench for the first time since he was a freshman, putting up 17 points and handing out eight assists in a win over Southern Mississippi.

Full strength or not, this is when people are sizing him up for the NBA. Wade, for one, thinks Diener can help an NBA team.

"I never go out of the house now, I never go to the grocery store, where someone doesn't say, 'Hey, YOU'RE GRAMMA DIENER,'" says June. "I really enjoy it, and I'm very proud."

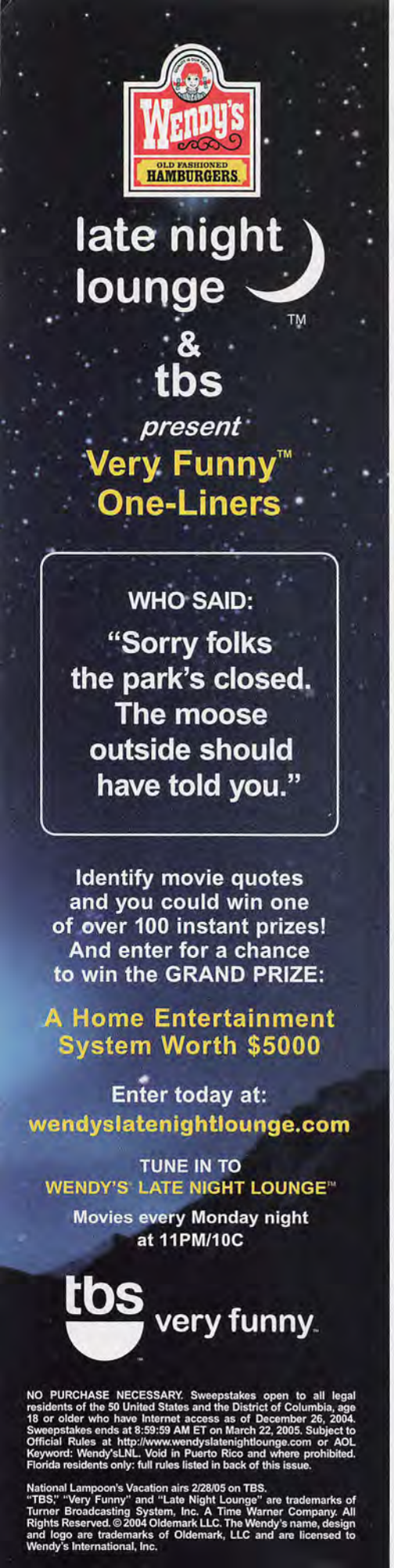
"I look at Travis as a Luke Ridnour kind of player, who can come in and help because he doesn't have to be the main guy," Wade says, invoking the Seattle SuperSonics' second-year point guard. For the nonce, though, on one leg or two, Diener is the main guy at Marquette.

"I'm really not thinking about [the NBA] at all," he says. "I'm just trying to get through this season, trying to win as many games as we can. I'm just trying to leave my mark here, for now."

In fact, this year there isn't a single Diener playing any sport at Fond du Lac High. June makes the trip to watch Dick's team play, and she tries to see her grandchildren in action as often as she can, although she hates to travel to Chicago. Even the basketball hoop on the garage is gone, knocked down by one of her grandsons over the Thanksgiving break. "He keeps telling me he's going to put it back up," she says. "He'd better." She also has a 10-year-old great-grandson—Angie's son, Jacob—whom she's keeping her eye on.

"He plays in all the little tournaments," she says. "He can play."

One son is one block over, and the other one is eight blocks away, and some of the grandchildren are playing on television now, and one of them might still play in the NBA, and she still misses the Optimist, who's missed so much of it. She dips her head just a little, and then she comes up, eyes smiling, pointing to another of the pictures on the dining room wall. The winter sun is high now, and there are no shadows in between. □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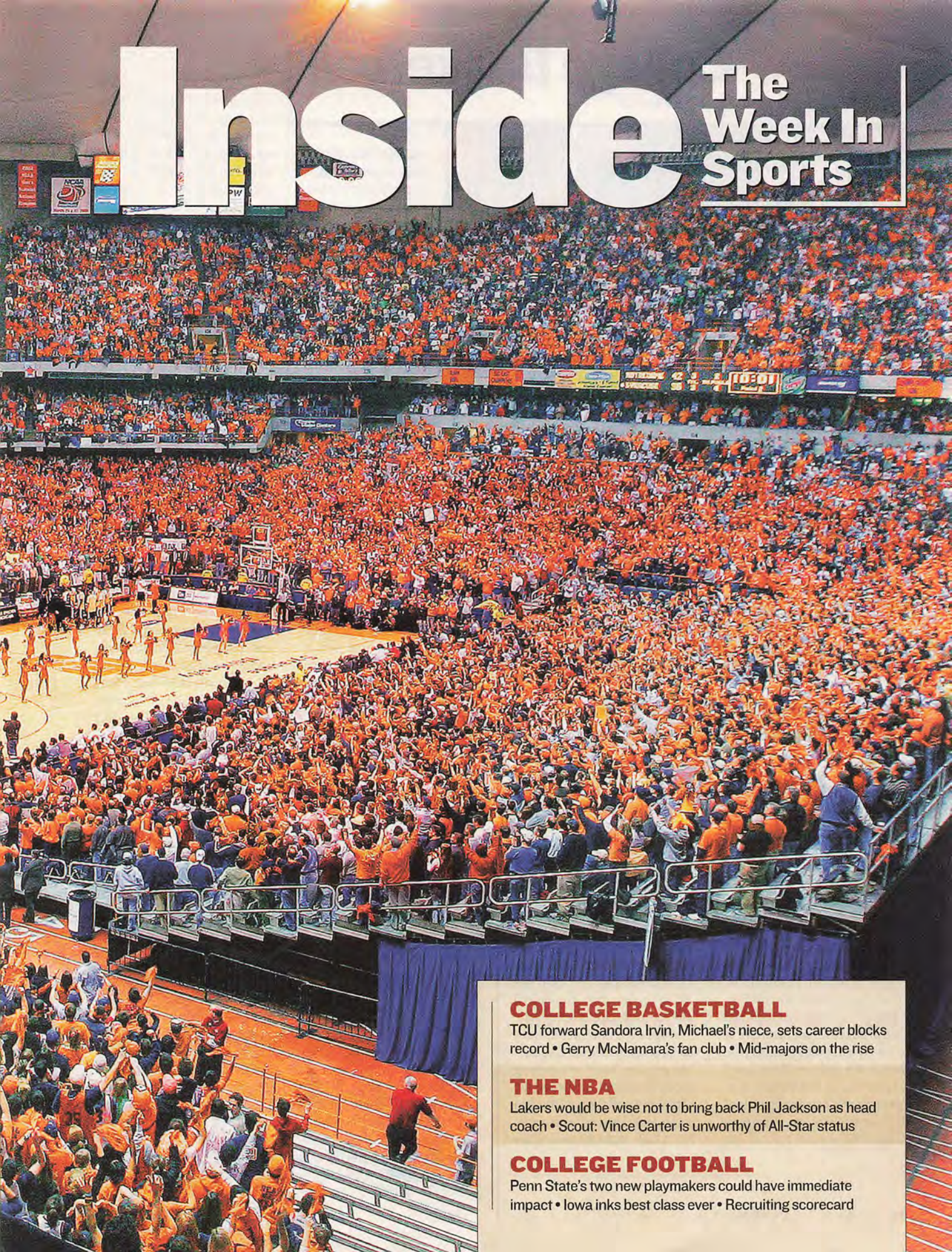
ORANGE COUNTY Syracuse set an NCAA on-campus basketball record at the Carrier Dome last Saturday with a crowd of 33,199 that was bolstered by a huge contingent from Scranton, Pa., the hometown of junior guard Gerry McNamara (page 77). The Orange beat Notre Dame 60–57.

Photograph by Steve Parker
Syracuse Athletics Communications



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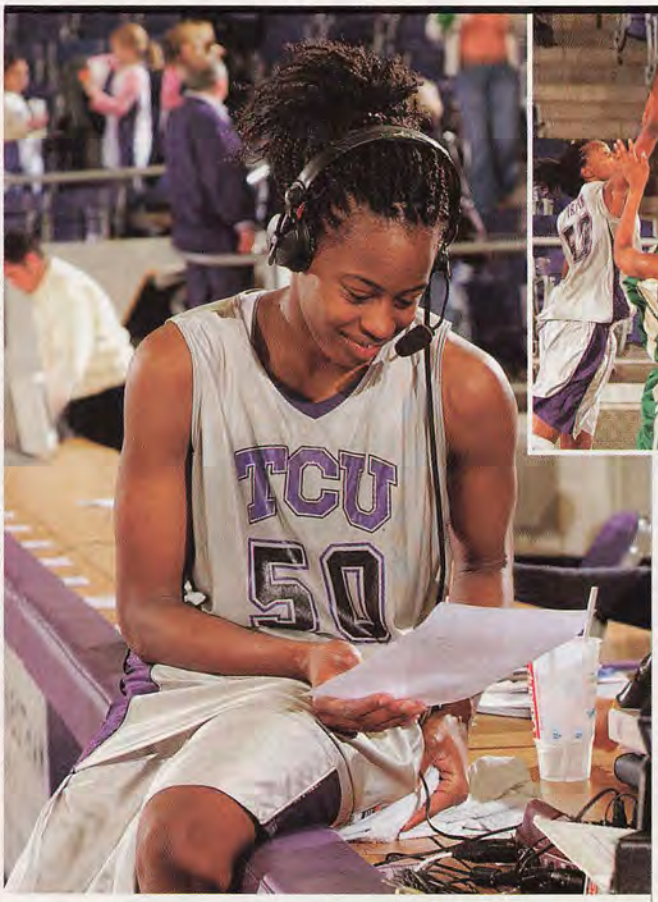


RECORD BREAKER After a rout of UAB, Irvin checked out her impressive line on the game's stat sheet.

Great Stuffs

TCU forward Sandora Irvin, making Uncle Michael proud, became the top shot blocker in NCAA women's history

Opponents have finally learned not to challenge Texas Christian senior forward Sandora Irvin. "Players won't bring the ball inside against us anymore," she says. Then she pauses. "Well, I guess they *shouldn't* bring it in anymore." That's because Irvin is a veritable wall as the Lady Frogs' last line of defense. Last Saturday, in a 74–64 win over Memphis, she broke the women's Division I record for career blocks, surpassing the previous mark of 428 set by Cal State–Fullerton's Genia Miller from 1987 to '91. After Monday's win over Saint Louis, Irvin's total sits at 442.

But the 6' 3" Irvin is not just a defensive specialist. She's a smooth post player who spent last summer working on her three-point shooting (she's made more this season, 15, than she did in her first three combined) and her ball handling, and she averages 20.3 points, 12.5 rebounds, 4.9 blocks and 2.3 steals. "As good as she is at blocking shots, I'd rather have her on the offensive end," says Georgia coach Andy Landers, whose then No. 3 Lady Bulldogs were upset by TCU in a November game in which Irvin had 28 points, 15 rebounds and eight blocks. "She can put the ball on the floor, shoot off the move and take you inside."

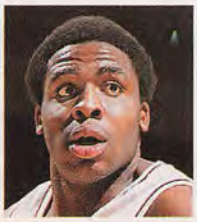
Irvin's accomplishments are more remarkable given her childhood in Fort Lauderdale. "I basically had to take care of myself," Irvin says. "A lot of my determination comes from my past." Her mother, who had trouble supporting her, sent her to live with her grandmother after fourth grade. Her grandmother died four years later, and Irvin lived first with her junior high coach and then her high school coach before her father took her in during her senior year in high school. That season she averaged 22.2 points, 17.5 rebounds and 8.1 blocks at Fort Lauderdale High and was named first-team All-USA by *USA Today*.

Irvin turned down national power Tennessee to sign with TCU. Part of the appeal of moving to Fort Worth was to be closer to her uncle, former Dallas Cowboys wide receiver Michael Irvin. When he's not out of town working for ESPN, the three-time Super Bowl champ brings his wife and kids to TCU games, where he acts the part of any other fan, berating the officials and jumping out of his seat to cheer his niece on. "You think he'd be quiet because he's Michael Irvin," she says. "But, no, it doesn't stop him." He also calls regularly to offer advice.

Irvin shares not only her uncle's competitive spirit but also his athleticism. Blessed with a 77-inch wingspan, she is a unique force on the court. Last month in a win over Alabama-Birmingham, she broke the Division I mark (men's and women's) for blocks in a game, finishing with an astounding triple double—the first in school history—of 20 points, 18 rebounds and 16 blocks. "It compares to back in the Georgetown days, with Patrick Ewing," says TCU coach Jeff Mittie. "She has changed the way people attack us. Teams design plays to take her out to the perimeter."

Irvin has already caught the attention of plenty of WNBA teams, and the buzz has her as a top 5 selection in the April draft. "She's going to cross the mind of the team that has that Number 1 pick," says San Antonio Silver Stars coach Dan Hughes. Adds Charlotte Sting coach Trudi Lacey, "She has a tremendous upside with her athleticism and her agility. And she seems to have the work ethic to improve and get better."

Pro Prospects



NBA scouts evaluate the potential of Arizona State forward Ike Diogu, a 6' 8", 255-pound junior who at week's end was leading the Pac-10 with averages of 22.6 points, 10.1 rebounds and 2.6 blocks.

"He's probably the most relentless player in college basketball. He's got a nose for rebounding, and that's something you can't teach. Usually if you can rebound the ball well in college, you'll be a pretty good rebounder in the NBA. . . . His size is an issue, though. I don't think he can be a full-time three-man because he'll have to handle the ball and shoot like a guard, and that's not his game. But he's an undersized four-man. . . . He's a good athlete but not an insane athlete like [Memphis forward] Rodney Carney. . . . I think he'll be a first-round pick, but he's not going to star at the next level."

LINDA KAYE/TCU MEDIA RELATIONS (2); SCOTT WACHTER/ICON SMI (DIOGU)

Irvin knows that wherever she ends up, her best days are still ahead of her. "I want to be successful," she says. "I won't let anything stop me."

MCNAMARA'S BAND

SU guard has a huge fan club

An NCAA on-campus record 33,199 people came to the Carrier Dome last Saturday and witnessed eighth-ranked Syracuse's come-from-behind 60–57 win over Notre Dame. According to one, albeit partial, observer, nearly a third of them were there to see 6' 2" Orange guard and Scranton, Pa., favorite son Gerry McNamara, which puts the buzz-cut junior between Xavier and Wichita State as a college hoops draw. "I would be willing to bet there will be 10,000 people there from Scranton and the surrounding Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area," said McNamara's father, Gerry, before the game. "There are a lot of Notre Dame fans in the area, but for this one game they put on the orange shirt and root for Gerry."

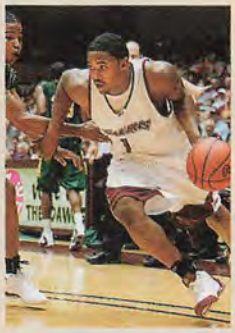
POSTER BOY McNamara's sizable cheering section was even bigger last Saturday.

Historically that has been a good move. Two years ago, when at least 4,000 Scrantonians made the 130-mile trip to the Dome for the Notre Dame game, McNamara hit a three-pointer with 20 seconds left to give the Orange an 82–80 victory. Last month in South Bend he scored a game-high 22 points, including a long three-pointer with just over a minute remaining and the shot clock winding down to seal a 70–61 win. But at the outset of Saturday's game it appeared that McNamara's Band—as his orange-clad following is known—would head back home unfulfilled. In an ugly first half for both teams, McNamara, a junior, missed all five of his three-point attempts and scored just four points. Despite two quick threes by McNamara coming out of the locker room, Syracuse fell behind by as much as 11 before rallying. Down five with 4:32 remaining, McNamara finally gave his fans the game-changing performance they came to see. He tied the score on a three-pointer and two free throws, then calmly hit another seven straight foul shots—including the Orange's last four points—down the stretch, even as the surround-sound chants of "Gerry! Gerry!" got so loud that Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim had to stand up and motion for quiet.

After the game McNamara, who scored 18 of his game-high 22 points in the second half, said, "The excitement tonight was unlike anything I've ever been a part of."

About 75 friends and family members waited inside the Dome to congratulate McNamara, but many of the rest of the 10,000 headed to nearby watering holes to celebrate. Bill Clark, the president of Scranton-based Cookies Travelers, one of several travel agencies that commandeered 50 buses to ferry McNamara's fans to the game, had to shout into his phone to be heard above the din of a jammed hotel bar. "I can't tell you how excited we are right now," he said, unnecessarily. "Gerry came through at the end, like we knew he would. He always finds a way to win." —*Kelli Anderson*

Seth Davis's Hoop Thoughts



MID-MAJOR UPRISING

With the Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-10 and SEC all having down years, mid-major conferences are in an unusually good position to claim a greater share of the 34 at-large bids to the NCAA tournament. As of Sunday, 10 mid-major teams were in the RPI top 40, with three in the top 20 (including **Darren Brooks**, *left*, and Southern Illinois at No. 14). According to Jerry Palm, who runs collegerpi.com, only three mid-majors were in the top 40 at the same time last year. The RPI numbers will change by Selection Sunday, if only because they are unfairly weighted to help teams from the so-called power conferences, but if there ever was a year for the selection committee to break its habit of favoring marquee conferences when it comes to dispensing at-large bids, this is it.

UNDER THE RADAR

La Salle junior forward **Steven Smith**

A 6' 8", 225-pound Philadelphia native, Smith has been one of the few bright spots for the Explorers, who ended a six-game losing streak on Sunday by beating Fordham 90–88 in overtime to improve to 6–14 (2–7 in the Atlantic 10). An athletic inside player with a soft shooting touch, Smith leads the A-10 in scoring (20.9 ppg, 11th in the nation) and is second in rebounding (8.9 rpg) and free throw shooting (81.9%). Smith did not play his first year on campus because he was an academic nonqualifier, but he is on pace to graduate in four years, which would earn him an additional season of eligibility. However, if Smith is projected to go high enough in the NBA draft—right now he's a second-round pick at best—he likely will opt to turn pro.

THREE-POINTER

1 **Minnesota** is in good shape for the NCAA tournament. The Golden Gophers, who haven't made the Big Dance since 1999, notched their most impressive win of the season last Saturday, beating Wisconsin 60–50 to move into a tie for third place in the Big Ten. They are No. 34 in the RPI.

2 The coach-of-the-year race is over. Despite using players left off most national recruiting rankings, **Al Skinner** had guided Boston College to a 20–0 record at week's end. That accomplishment represents the best coaching job the college game has seen in years.

3 Siena's **Rob Lanier** is on his way out. The Saints' fourth-year coach acknowledged last week that he'll probably be fired after the season. Among those expected to be interviewed to replace him are Syracuse assistant Mike Hopkins and Georgia Tech assistant Cliff Warren.

More Hoop Thoughts from Seth Davis every Tuesday at **SI.com**.

RICK STEWART/GETTY IMAGES (SIGN); STEVE JAHNKE/THE SOUTHERN/AP (BROOKS); DON MURRAY (SMITH)

by Ian Thomsen

RePhil Time?

The Lakers might try to bring back Phil Jackson, but it's unlikely he'll return. For L.A.'s sake, he shouldn't

It seemed a good idea last summer: In the midst of unloading Shaquille O'Neal and letting Phil Jackson walk, the Lakers gave a five-year, $30 million contract to coach Rudy Tomjanovich in the hope he could create a new dynasty around Kobe Bryant. But Rudy T resigned on Feb. 2 because of health concerns, forcing G.M. Mitch Kupchak to devise yet another rebuilding strategy. Lakers fans can only hope he'll come up with a better idea than rehiring Jackson, whose name surfaced as a potential replacement. "Nothing is going to happen in a knee-jerk fashion," says Kupchak. "This is an emotional period of time, and we have to give these guys [the players and coaches] a chance for things to settle down."

A Tomjanovich confidant says two sets of pressures had been building for a month on the 56-year-old coach, who took the Lakers' job after sitting out last season while recovering from bladder cancer. One was a concern that work stress could lead to a recurrence of the cancer. The other was a sense of isolation that was only natural for a Rockets legend who had spent the previous 34 seasons as a player, coach and consultant in Houston, where he was surrounded by a staff of longtime friends to whom he was comfortable delegating authority. Not only was Tomjanovich worn down by having to manage more of the day-to-day video work and game-planning in L.A., but he also found it unusually upsetting when team owner Jerry Buss said after a Jan. 28 loss to the Nets that he wanted Luke Walton and Slava Medevedenko playing more.

HARD CORE In Odom (left) and Bryant, who's injured, L.A.'s coach will have a solid nucleus.

Jackson bade farewell to L.A. a year ago by writing an entertaining diary, *The Last Season*, in which he betrayed confidences and trashed Bryant. Yet Kupchak insists that he and Buss won't throw the book back at Jackson when considering whether he should replace interim coach Frank Hamblen. "I find it hard to believe that anything could stand in the way of us wanting to win, including a book," said Kupchak last Friday, adding that he and Buss hadn't seriously discussed rehiring Jackson, whose agent says he won't take an NBA job this year. "The obvious answer is that Phil is available and he's one of the best coaches of all time—why wouldn't he be considered by any team?"

Yet rumors of a Napoleonesque return sound like grandstanding on both sides: For Jackson they serve to drive up his price with the Knicks, Mavericks, Timberwolves, Trail Blazers or other potential suitors this summer; for the Lakers, and for Bryant in particular, the open-mindedness to Jackson this year looks very much like an attempt to prove that Bryant wasn't responsible for forcing him out.

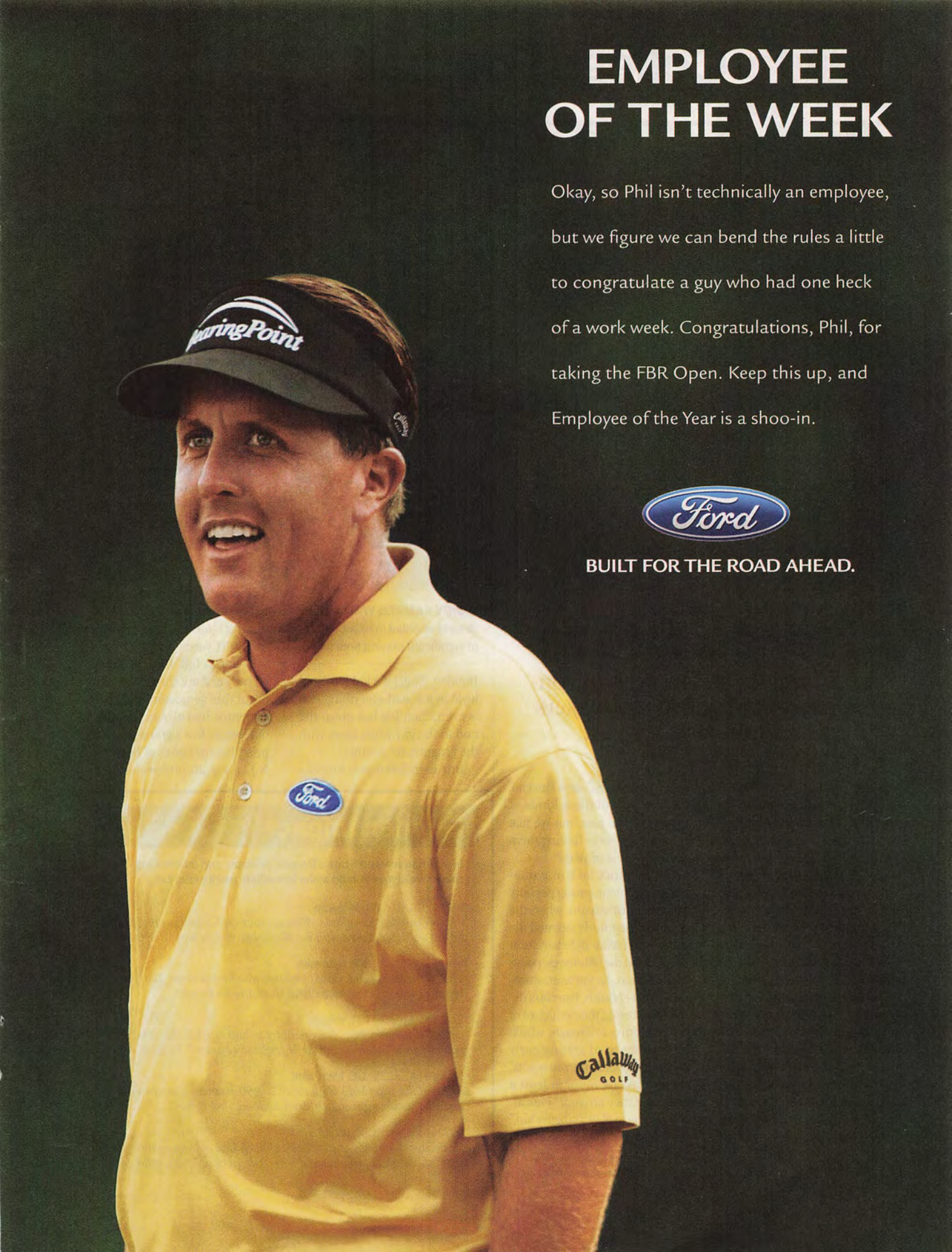
After watching Jackson wear out his welcome and Rudy T simply wear out, it's clear that the Lakers need new energy. Their core players—Bryant, Lamar Odom, Caron Butler, Chris Mihm and rookie guard Sasha Vujacic—are 26 or younger. By 2007, when every contract but Bryant's, Odom's and Vujacic's are due to expire, L.A. could be a player in the free-agent market. Instead of going back in time to hire Jackson or Larry Brown, Kupchak should choose a young NBA assistant who has served on a title team, such as Pacers associate head coach Mike Brown (a member of the 2002–03 Spurs staff) or Bucks assistant Jim Boylen (who aided Tomjanovich during the Rockets' championship run in the mid-1990s). Find the next Pat Riley. □

Scout's Take

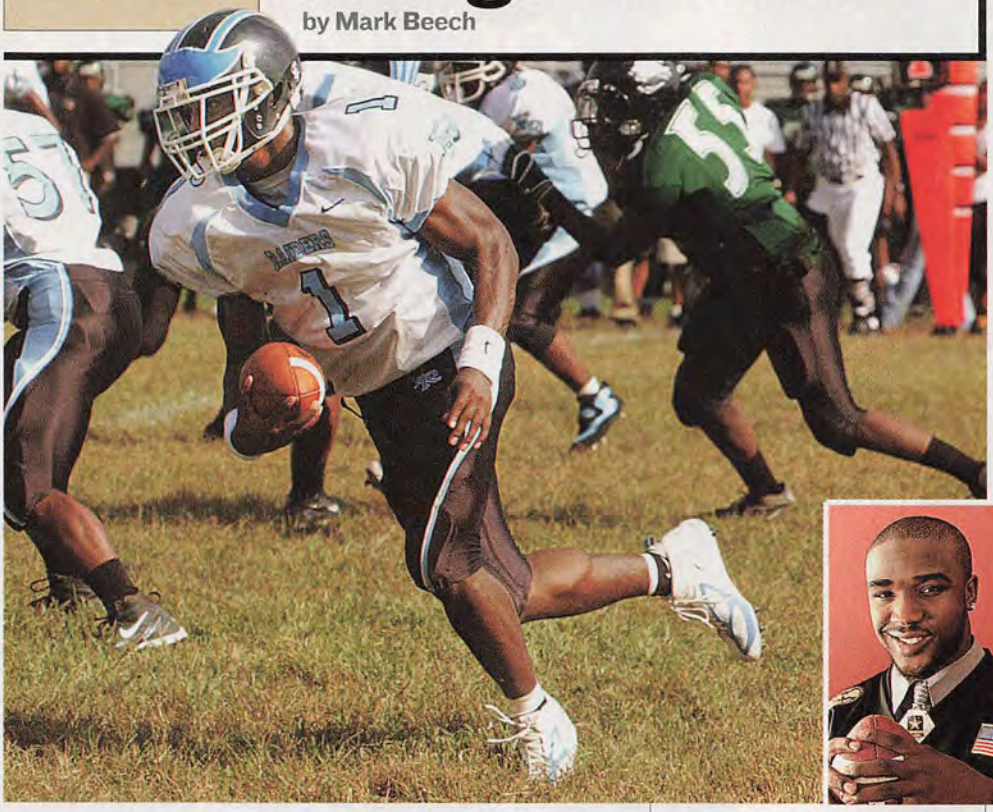
On his picks for the All-Star starters, which were chosen by fans and announced last week:

"It's obviously a popularity contest; Vince Carter was getting votes two months ago while he was dogging it 20 minutes a night for Toronto. I'd suspend Carter from the game for dereliction of duty—wouldn't even let him dress. In the East, I'd stick with Allen Iverson at point guard and Shaquille O'Neal at center and shift LeBron James to forward alongside Jermaine O'Neal. It's no crime to make a swingman of LeBron, especially when it would allow me to start Richard Hamilton (above), *who gets the nod at shooting guard over Dwyane Wade because of his contributions to Detroit's championship. I'd name Tim Duncan as the center in the West, which would open up a slot for Dirk Nowitzki at forward alongside Kevin Garnett, with Steve Nash as the point guard and Ray Allen in a close call over Kobe Bryant. The coaches should be [the Suns'] Mike D'Antoni and [the Bulls'] Scott Skiles, who have done the best jobs so far."*

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (ODOM); KEVORK DJANSEZIAN/AP (BRYANT); STEVE C. MITCHELL/EPA (HAMILTON)


EMPLOYEE
OF THE WEEK
Okay, so Phil isn't technically an employee, but we figure we can bend the rules a little to congratulate a guy who had one heck of a work week. Congratulations, Phil, for taking the FBR Open. Keep this up, and Employee of the Year is a shoo-in.
Ford
BUILT FOR THE ROAD AHEAD.

by Mark Beech



HAPPY CAMPER Williams has already enrolled in expectation of significant playing time in '05.

Altered State

Penn State got with the program on signing day, adding two playmakers who'll provide an instant spark

MOST POWERHOUSE programs would have little reason to celebrate a recruiting class that experts ranked no better than 19th in the nation. But at Penn State, which is coming off its fourth losing season in five years, there's more to this year's class than its ranking. That's because coach Joe Paterno's 19 signees include two of the nation's top prospects, wide receiver Derrick Williams and cornerback Justin King—speedy playmakers who should add desperately needed punch to the Nittany Lions' offense (104th out of 117 Division I-A schools in '04) and special teams. "There isn't as much balance, but I think we helped ourselves where we had to help ourselves," says Paterno, 78. "We've had these kinds of players in the past, but we just fell a little short in finding them the last couple of years."

Penn State's lack of game-breaking talent was especially apparent last season, when the offense's ineptitude negated the efforts of a stellar defensive unit that allowed the fifth-fewest points in the nation. As the team stumbled to a 4–7 finish, Paterno's detractors pressed their criticism of his recruiting approach, which had emphasized getting early commitments from prospects, then sitting them for at least a year after they arrived. "Joe's always going to play the better kid," says defensive coordinator Tom Bradley, "[but] if a kid has been loyal to Joe, and everything else is even, then Joe has given the nod to the kid who's been with the program for a while."

But with freshmen busting out at places like USC, Michigan and Oklahoma, that approach is a tough sell to today's recruits. "Elite players want to know they can make an impact as freshmen," says Allen Wallace of *SuperPrep* and scout.com. "Penn State's been trying to sign these kids for years. Now [the Nittany Lions] have to show them that what's happening in Los Angeles can happen in Happy Valley."

Says Paterno, "It was pretty easy for us to say, 'Look, we've got a pretty solid football team. We have everything but a few playmakers. It's an opportunity for you to come in and help us get back to the top.' "

The jewel of this year's class is Williams, considered by some experts to be the nation's top recruit. A 6' 1", 185-pound flier from Roosevelt High, in Greenbelt, Md., he's a Reggie Bush type who rolled up more than 3,000 all-purpose yards as a senior. King, a two-way star at Pittsburgh's Gateway High, rushed for 1,901 yards and 30 touchdowns last fall. Both graduated early and are enrolled at Penn State this semester, and their presence has already made a difference: In a signing-day surprise, Jerome Hayes of Bayonne, N.J., a top 20 prospect at line-

Sudden Impact

In addition to Penn State's Derrick Williams and Justin King, these five signees could make immediate marks next fall

KEVIN GRADY, RB, Michigan
Already enrolled, the alltime Michigan state high school rushing leader (8,431 yards) practiced with the Wolverines during Rose Bowl week.

MARLON LUCKY, RB, Nebraska
The North Hollywood, Calif., product, who turned down USC, could become the best Cornhuskers back since Ahman Green.

EUGENE MONROE, T, Virginia
Offensive linemen frequently redshirt to bulk up, but the 6' 6" 318-pounder from South Plainfield, N.J., already has an NFL body.

MELVIN ALAEZE, DE, Maryland
At Randallstown (Md.) High the 6' 2" 280-pounder also saw time at defensive tackle, tight end, fullback, tailback and punter.

RYAN PERRILLOUX, QB, LSU
He doesn't lack confidence. "I could definitely be a Heisman winner next year," the brash Louisianan told USA Today, *"or at least a candidate."*

CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON/THE GAZETTE; MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II/DEUCE3 PHOTOGRAPHY (INSET)

backer, announced he was headed to Happy Valley.

The 2005 season looks promising for the Nittany Lions if JoePa turns loose his freshmen. "One of the good things about the cottage industry of recruiting is that the kids get so much exposure that they're not blindsided by all the attention they get as freshmen," Paterno says. He also thinks they arrive game-ready. "I mean, they can read a two-deep zone. They're just much more competent than they used to be, and they have a lot more poise. It won't be all Greek to them."

IOWA

Ferentz Builds A Following

Perhaps the most surprising recruiting development took place at Iowa, where coach Kirk Ferentz and his staff put together the first top 10 recruiting class in school history. The Hawkeyes

FOLLOW ME Christensen committed to Iowa early, then helped lure other top players.

signed five Chicago-area players ranked among the top 10 in the country at their respective positions. Quarterback Jake Christensen (6' 1", 205 pounds; Lockport, Ill.) was the first to announce his intentions, last summer, and he was followed last month at the U.S. Army All-American Bowl by tight end Anthony Moeaki (6' 4", 235; Wheaton), defensive end Ryan Bain (6'2", 260, Bolingbrook) and offensive tackles Dan Doering (6' 7", 290; Barrington) and Dace Richardson (6' 6", 300; Wheaton). "They all helped recruit each other," says Eric Johnson, Iowa's tight ends coach and recruiting coordinator. "Jake had as much impact as anybody. He wanted to find guys who could block for him."

In his first three seasons in Iowa City, Ferentz had a combined record of 11–24. But over the last three years Iowa has gone 31–7, shared two Big Ten championships and finished No. 8 in the AP poll each season. The Hawkeyes have won two straight January postseason games, including last month's thrilling last-second victory over LSU in the Capital One Bowl. Impressively, Ferentz has done all that without ever landing a recruiting class that was ranked higher than 35th by *SuperPrep*. "Six years ago we weren't able to grab the interest of top prospects," Ferentz says. "Recruiting is certainly critical, but overall our focus has always been on the guys we've had on campus."

Few college coaches are better at developing talent than Ferentz, especially along the offensive line. Instead of blue-chip prospects, the coach has gone after "football players"—by his definition, kids who are tough, smart and self-motivated. Under his tutelage such lightly touted prospects as tight end Dallas Clark and tackle Robert Gallery blossomed into All-Americas and first-round NFL draft picks. Indeed, five Hawkeyes have been snapped up in each of the last two drafts. Aside from wins and championships, there may be no statistic more important to a recruit. "Almost every senior starter we've had in the last two years has had an opportunity to play pro football," says Johnson.

Though this year's recruiting class may be longer on talent than usual, the coach insists they're all his kind of guys. "Players of our personality tend to gravitate toward this program," says Ferentz. "They're all willing to do what it takes to get better. I don't think any of these kids picked Iowa because they liked our helmets best." □

Recruiting Report Card

WINNERS

NEBRASKA ASSISTANT JOHN BLAKE
The former Oklahoma head coach signed eight of the Huskers' 31 recruits, including highly touted California RB Marlon Lucky *(right)*, helping to give Nebraska its best class in years.

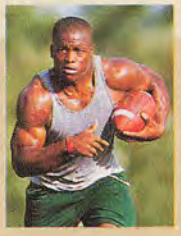
FIRST-YEAR COACHES URBAN MEYER AND LES MILES
On short notice, Meyer landed a solid class at Florida with standouts from across the country. LSU newcomer Miles scored big when dual-threat QB Ryan Perrilloux chose the Tigers over Texas, to whom he had verbally committed.

TENNESSEE
Scout.com's No. 1 class includes players from 11 states and D.C. The momentum already has carried over to next year; last Thursday, DE Lee Smith of Knoxville committed for '06.

USC
As if they needed help, the Trojans signed standout QB Mark Sanchez of Mission Viejo, Calif., and plucked the best player out of Tennessee, consensus top five WR Patrick Turner.

FLORIDA STATE
A flood of late signees led by WR Fred Rouse and top five RB Antone Smith, both in-state pickups, helped the Seminoles outrecruit rival Miami for the first time in years.

LOSERS



FIRST-YEAR COACHES RON ZOOK AND TYRONE WILLINGHAM
A dynamic recruiter at Florida, Zook didn't have nearly that success with his first class at Illinois (ranked as low as 51st by the experts). Willingham, who had trouble bringing in talent at Notre Dame before taking the Washington job, lost out on several of the state's best, including RB Jonathan Stewart *(above)*, who chose Oregon.

MIAMI
The 'Canes failed to sign a skill player on offense despite their pursuit of Florida RB Antone Smith and California QB Derek Shaw. They enter '05 with two scholarship QBs (zero starts).

NOTRE DAME
A late-arriving new coaching staff handcuffed the Irish, whose class generally ranked outside the top 30. They lost top Ohio DL Lawrence Wilson to Ohio State and New Jersey OL Brian Roche to Louisville.

TEXAS
The Longhorns missed out on three top targets—TE Martellus Bennett, QB Ryan Perrilloux and WR Fred Rouse—and signed only one QB (from a small school) after coach Mack Brown said he needed two "great ones." *—Gene Menez*

More recruiting news and analysis at SI.com/football/college.

TOM HAUCK/ICON SMI (CHRISTENSEN); JULIANN TALLINO/MAXPREPS/ICON SMI (LUCKY); TONY OVERMAN, THE OLYMPIAN/AP (STEWART)

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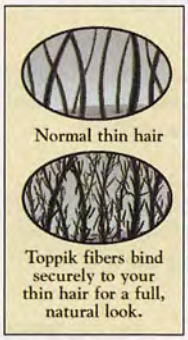

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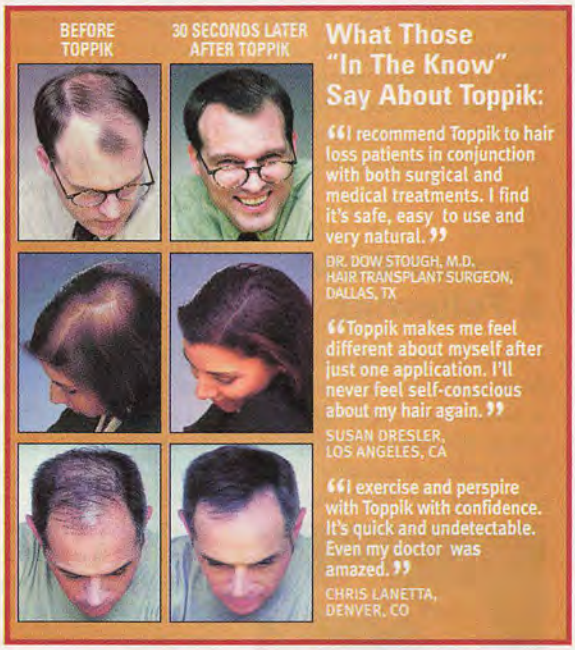

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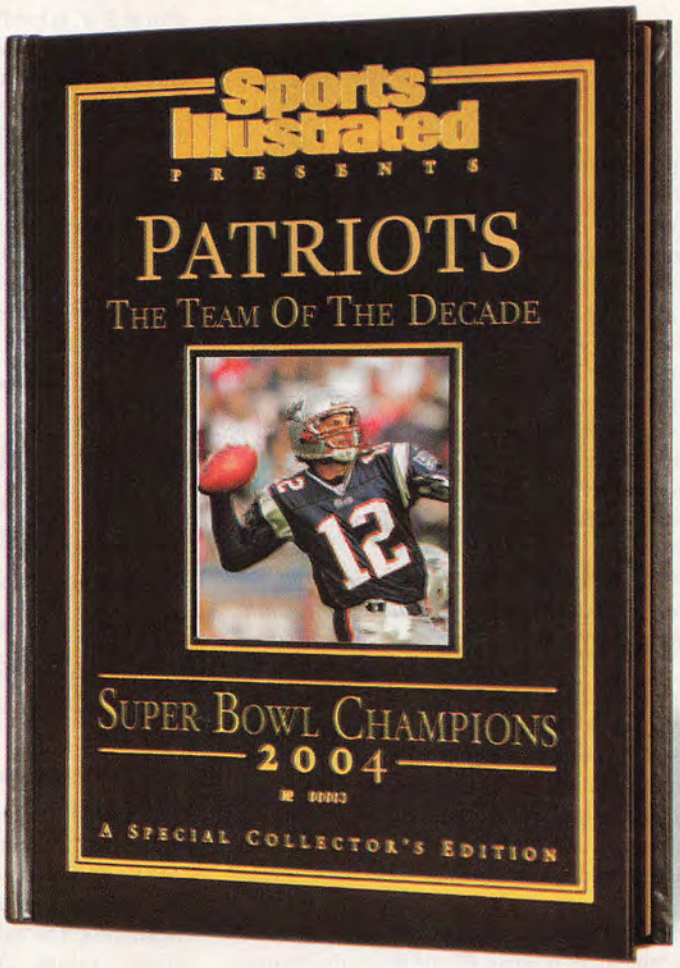

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Making the Right Calls

by Rick Reilly

IN THE final hours before the Super Bowl, NFL players have been known to go and get, say, a $40 hooker. Or go to Tijuana and get *muy* smashed. Or try to set the coke-snorting world record.

But before this Super Bowl, wide receiver Deion Branch of the Patriots did something even stranger.

He picked up his cellphone and called every coach in his life who meant something to him. He called Pee Wee coaches. He called his high school receivers coach. He called his junior college offensive coordinator. He called his college head coach. He called 13 coaches in all.

And do you know what he told them? Thank you.

Thank you for caring about me when I could've gone south. Thank you for making me run stairs. Thank you for believing I could do this.

He thanked his coach at Louisville for not giving up on him when his grades were lousy. He thanked his high school coach for believing he wasn't too puny. He thanked one coach for being there for him when his infant son was near death.

He got so emotional while thanking them that "I was crying half the time," says Branch, 25. "It's hard, but I don't want them to think I've left them behind. I want them to know I'm thinking about them all the time."

And when he was done calling—about two hours later—he got on the team bus, put on his number 83 and made the Patriots thank God they had drafted him.

Branch caught 11 passes—tying the Super Bowl record co-owned by his hero, Jerry Rice—for 133 yards. He was named the MVP of New England's 24–21 win over the Eagles.

If you're counting, that's two Super Bowls, 21 catches, 276 yards, one MVP, two rings and maybe the one example of a pro who understands that being a great athlete is the work of dozens of people, not one.

"He called this afternoon [Super Bowl Sunday] about three and said, 'Coach, I'm calling to say thank you for the many ways you helped me,' " says Vernorris Bradley, who was Branch's receivers coach at Monroe High in Albany, Ga. "He said, 'Thanks for all the ways you influenced me. I just want you to know how much I appreciate all you did.' "

Usually, the response to these calls is something like, "Am I being *Punk'd*?"

"I mean, I was just floored," says Bradley, who retired after the 2003 season. "A guy that famous and successful can think about a guy who coached him so long ago? On the day of the Super Bowl? Man, that's somebody who hasn't forgotten where he came from."

Branch even called the coach who cut him from the middle school team. "He kicked me off the bus," remembers Branch, who at 5' 9" is hardly bigger than the MVP trophy he was lugging around Jacksonville late Sunday night. "He said I was too small and I'd get hurt. I was *so* mad."

Of course, Branch has heard that *Short People* song his whole life. "The 49ers said that, too. [Before the draft] they said I was a good player but too small for this league."

Wonder if they still think that after watching Branch tear through the Eagles' secondary—the one with (cough, cough) three Pro Bowl players—like a minibike through a herd of drugged elephants. It was as if they didn't even see him. And he broke them for good in the fourth quarter when he just flat picked the pocket of cornerback Sheldon Brown, turning a sure interception into a 19-yard gain that set up the field goal that gave the Pats a 10-point lead.

Super Bowl MVP Deion Branch understands that being a great athlete is the work of dozens of people, not one.

Oh, and don't forget, it was Branch who double-handedly killed the Steelers in the AFC Championship Game. I mean, Tom Brady is good, but he isn't throwing them to *himself*.

Of course, after Branch won the MVP, he thanked God, his blockers, his coaches—everyone but his dental hygienist and his own marvelous Velcro hands.

O.K., so Branch is a gratitude freak. So sue. Four years ago he nearly lost one of his newborn twin sons, Deiondre, to spinal meningitis. The baby was in a hospital being kept alive by machines. "I think [Deion] was having to decide whether it was time to unplug," says Bradley, when a "miracle" occurred. The infant suddenly responded to treatment.

On Sunday, Deiondre was chasing his brother, Deiontey, around a Super Bowl field of confetti. Now his father holds on tightly to anything that comes his way—spirals *and* sons.

After the game some corporate suit told Branch that as the MVP he could pick any Cadillac he wanted, not just the red coupe that had been rolled to the 50-yard line after the game to show it off.

"Well," Branch grinned, "that little one on the field looked pretty sweet."

He sure did. □

If you have a comment for Rick Reilly, send it to **reilly@siletters.com**

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